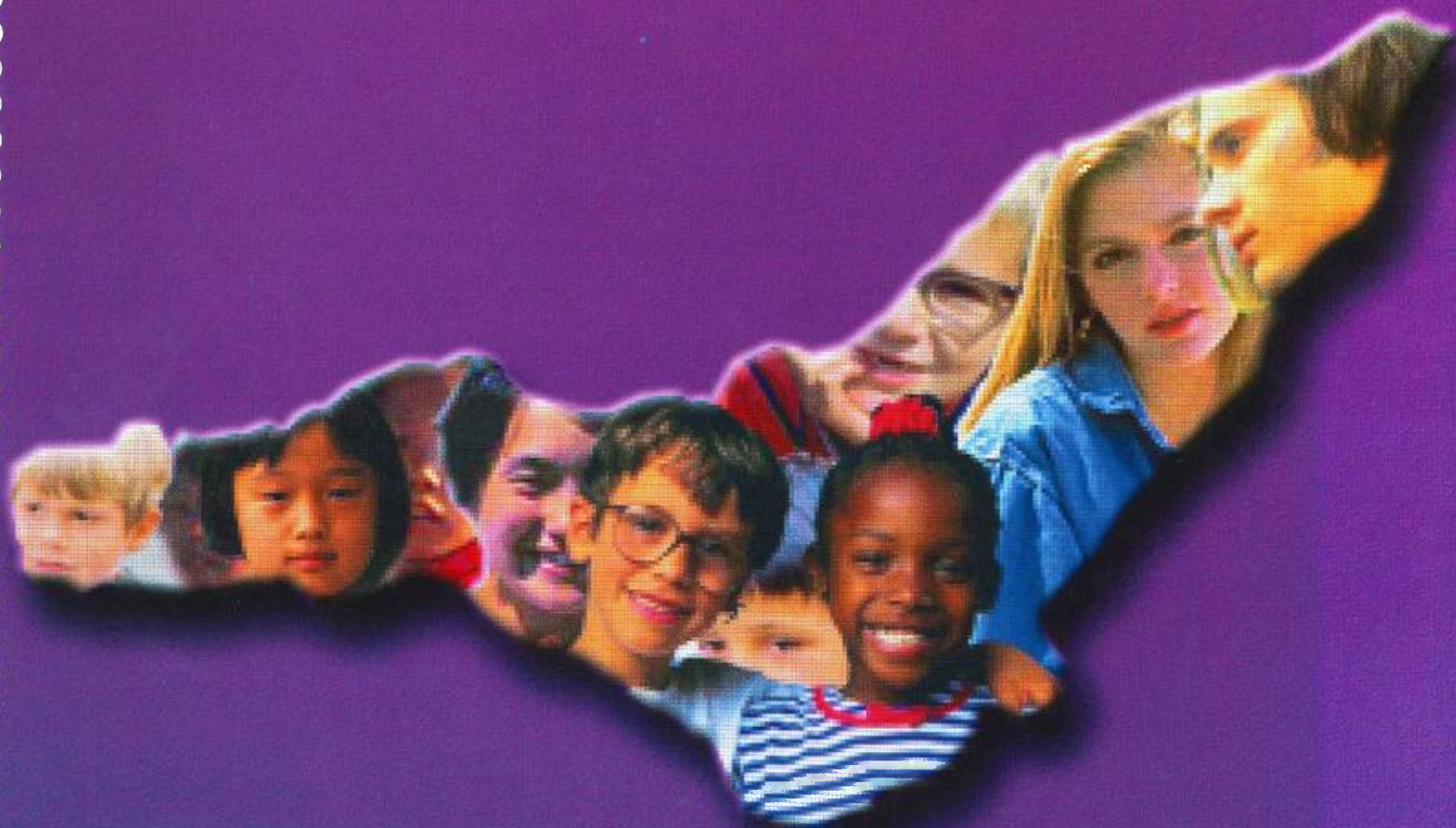# Strengthening Ties between Schools and Communities:

A KEY MEASURE TO SUPPORT THE EDUCATIONAL SUCCESS OF OUR YOUTH

The Supporting Montréal Schools Program

New DIRECTIONS for success TOGETHER

Québec

STRENGTHENING TIES BETWEEN SCHOOLS AND COMMUNITIES: A KEY MEASURE TO SUPPORT THE EDUCATIONAL SUCCESS OF OUR YOUTH

Direction des services aux communautés culturelles
et École montréalaise

Ministère de l'Éducation

March 2000

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INTRODUCTION

In 1995, the Conseil supérieur de l'éducation issued a brief to the then Minister of Education, Pauline Marois, underlining the urgent need to deal with the problems facing Montréal schools.[1] The Commission for the Estates General on Education[2] later raised the same concern in a statement calling for greater attention to schools located in disadvantaged neighbourhoods with a high concentration of immigrant students or students born of immigrant parents. The Ministerial Plan of Action for education reform[3] addressed this concern when it made supporting Montréal schools one of the lines of action required to define success in education.

During deliberations by the Commission for the Estates General of Education, the opinion was also expressed that schools should open up to the world beyond their walls by developing partnership ties with the community, among other things. The call was heard. The reform sought to give schools greater autonomy by creating governing boards with guaranteed community representation.

In its first year, the Supporting Montréal Schools Program included steps to foster cooperation between schools and the world beyond their walls. Since the 1998-99 school year, the need for this cooperation has been emphasized by the program in two ways. First, one of the program's three major orientations is to promote cooperation between schools and communities, and secondly, one of the related measures involves promoting *Cooperation between schools, families and communities*.

Under this measure, a discussion group on forging ties between schools and community organizations (*Groupe de réflexion pour l'établissement d'un partenariat entre les écoles et les organismes communautaires, GREPEOC*) was formed, with the following mandate:

To define conditions favourable to the establishment and development of a partnership, while respecting the limitations and realities of each partner.

The membership of this discussion group (see Appendix for a list of members) was determined so as to ensure fair representation of various school and community partners who play a vital role in the educational success of our youth.

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1. **Conseil supérieur de l'éducation**, *La réussite à l'école montréalaise : une urgence pour la société québécoise*, Brief, 1996, p. 116.

2. **Commission for the Estates General on Education**, *Renewing Our Education System: Ten Priority Actions*, Final Report of the Commission for the Estates General on Education (Ministère de l'Éducation, 1996).

3. **Ministère de l'Éducation**, *A New Direction for Success. Ministerial Plan of Action for the Reform of the Education System*, 1997.

This document was produced under the Supporting Montréal Schools Program and is the fruit of the discussion group's hard work. It proposes some tools to help guide schools and community organizations that wish to adopt this measure and take a more definitive step toward partnership. The document first outlines the objectives of this undertaking, then presents suggested methods of intervention.

OBJECTIVES

This document addresses the following objectives:

General Objectives:

- to provide schools targeted by the Supporting Montréal Schools Program, or any other school or community organization, with an information instrument on the needs identified and related to the educational success of young people;

- to equip various partners with common reference tools that will enable them to initiate and build an effective working relationship;

Specific Objectives:

- to enable schools to become more quickly familiar with the community resources that meet their needs;

- to enable community organizations to develop a network of partners that could offer additional support and resources;

- to suggest tools that each partner can use to identify the needs of the other partners so that they can adjust their mutual expectations and choose action plans that support educational success.

PROPOSED INFORMATION AIDS

This document includes the following information aids:

- a list of conditions conducive to the development of partnerships between schools and communities;

- a list of what students, school staff and parents felt was needed to achieve educational success, and examples of activities designed to strengthen partnership ties and respond to these needs;

- an example of a statement of understanding, which partners may use to develop their own ways of working together.

PARTNERSHIP: FINDING THE RIGHT WORDS . . .
PUTTING THEM INTO ACTION

The question of partnership between institutions (schools or other), the community and citizens has raised a debate marked by both enthusiasm and scepticism:

"Partnership is essential. We can't go on living in our own little bubble."
"From the government's perspective, partnership is a pretext for foisting its responsibilities on citizens and volunteers."
"For organizations, partnership is a pretext for applying for more subsidies."
"Everyone is trying to get a bigger piece of the pie, while students and citizens suffer the consequences of this power struggle."

These comments gleaned from various sources show that although everyone agrees on the importance of mobilizing efforts toward a common goal, an endeavour of this kind is not without a number of difficulties and misconceptions.

FINDING THE RIGHT WORDS . . .

What does the dictionary say?

According to *The Canadian Oxford Dictionary*, "partner" can have the following meanings:

"A player . . . on the same side in a game."
"A country, organization, etc. that has an agreement with another or others. . . ."

The concept of partnership involves an alliance against a common enemy (dropping out of school or social exclusion in this case), an exchange and an association aimed at achieving a common goal (sports-related, diplomatic or, in this case, socio-educational). A partnership cannot, therefore, be based solely on good intentions. If intentions are not combined with a specific goal shared by all of the partners, there is a risk that the partnership will not be solidified and that the partners will lose their sense of purpose as interest wanes and differences in opinion arise (i.e., "That's a good idea, but . . .").

Definition proposed by the discussion group

Of course, the definition of the concept of partnership varies according to the context, the nature of the project, the objectives involved and the approach used. However, for the purposes of this document, and in order to ensure that all the partners engaged in strengthening ties between the school and the community share the same understanding, the discussion group proposes the following definition:

> *"Partnership is an alliance aimed at testing and developing means of promoting the educational success of young people. This alliance involves pooling efforts, resources and know-how at school, within the family and within the community. Concretely, this initiative translates into projects, services and activities designed to identify, prevent and counter economic, social, psychological and environmental difficulties that cause students to drop out of school."*

... PUTTING THEM INTO ACTION

Common values

Partnership is more than just a word. In a strong partnership, each player must respect and subscribe to the following principles:

- mutual respect between partners;

- equality between all partners, regardless of their socio-economic situation, level of schooling, social status, knowledge of the school system, job, etc.;

- recognition of the educational skills of each partner by all individuals concerned (parents, school staff and community workers);

- the complementary nature of the partners' skills;

- common social and educational concerns;

- concern for the interests of youth. Partners agree not to promote the interests of a specific group to the detriment of the common concerns underlying the partnership, specifically the interests of youth.

Clearly defined guidelines

- Clearly formulate the objective of the partnership: the objective should be specific enough to provide meaningful guidelines and broad enough to encompass all of the educational concerns and skills of parents, community organizations and school staff.

- Clearly determine the expectations, roles, responsibilities, needs, areas of jurisdiction, but also the availability, skills and limitations of the various partners concerned.

- Clearly identify designated representatives, especially those mandated by the

school and partner organizations, in order to establish ongoing collaborative projects (for instance, in some allophone families, parents sometimes delegate authority to other family members).

- Develop a statement of understanding among partners: this tool structures the process and ensures a common understanding of the objectives and desired results (see the example on page 20).

- Establish effective mechanisms designed to promote communication between partners, taking into account the question of protecting personal information, relations with the CLSC and other organizations, contact with parents, etc.

- Take advantage of the presence of representatives of the various partners at local and regional round tables. This is an excellent additional communication mechanism that enables the various representatives to keep abreast of changing needs around them and to pinpoint new areas of intervention, if any.

- Ensure that the various interventions complement one another. Avoid duplication, which wastes financial resources and creates competition between organizations.

- Make a concerted effort to draw up a yearly plan of activities to be conducted within the partnership. Who does what? When? How? What evaluation and follow-up mechanisms are in place?

- Carry out a yearly evaluation of the results of activities conducted within the partnership. Develop alternative measures, rethink objectives or means, if necessary.

- Envisage mechanisms designed to emphasize successful initiatives, to inform everyone involved about difficulties encountered by partners and to explore ways of improving collaborative efforts.

- At the beginning of each year, publicize and make changes to the process, plans and parties involved in developing ties between the school and the community, so that new parents and other partners can take part in the project. Given that the school and community representatives sometimes move or change jobs, nothing should be taken for granted. As a result, at the start of each school year, make sure that all players are aware of the content of the project and its history.

FULFILLING THE NEEDS OF SCHOOL STAFF, PARENTS AND STUDENTS IN SUPPORT OF EDUCATIONAL SUCCESS AND PROPOSING PLANS OF ACTION

DETERMINING NEEDS AND KNOWING WHERE TO START

School staff and community workers recognize that their efforts to collaborate with others and to share their know-how in children's best interest often come up against the following questions that must be addressed:

- Where do we start?
- What activity or what project should we choose to secure the collaboration?
- How do we set realistic objectives that take into account both the interests of students and the constraints of school and community partners?

In order to help partners choose a collaborative project and common objectives that suit their situation and needs, the discussion group conducted the following exercise:

- first, a list of the needs most commonly expressed by partners was drawn up on the basis of survey results;
- on the basis of this list, the various needs were grouped into four categories and formulated as objectives of a collaborative effort.

The following pages provide a description of the various types of needs identified as well as suggested plans of action to forge a strong alliance.

A CLEAR PICTURE BASED ON PARTNERS' NEEDS AND OBJECTIVES

Surmounting organizational obstacles

Various levels and forms of joint action already exist between the different partners directly or indirectly involved in supporting educational success (round tables[4], governing boards, etc.). Yet, organizational obstacles persist and sometimes lead to misunderstandings, misconceptions and even mutual mistrust. Community organizations, much like the school and the family unit, have their own codes, culture, way of doing things, etc. Above all, collaboration must be based on a certain measure of transparency which allows partners to understand each other's situations—this must not, however, result in a loss of autonomy or identity. Schools should, therefore, become more familiar with the reality of community organizations, and vice versa.

Each partner's needs

<u>School staff</u>

- Being able to refer to a bank of individuals and organizations within the community in order to direct students and parents to the resources that meet their needs or to obtain support for managing particular situations.

- Being able to make better use of round tables and other similar bodies in order to transmit and receive information that could help to ensure that the actions within the community complement one another.

<u>Parents</u>

- Being considered active partners in their children's educational success, rather than clients or service users.

- Having access to the information and basic tools that will enable them to become involved in collaborative and decision-making activities with full knowledge of the facts, so that they do not feel excluded from debates (or at a disadvantage given that institutional and community partners are more familiar with the jargon and the rules of the game in terms of cooperative action).

<u>Students</u>

- Being able to develop a more positive perception of the school so that it is not simply associated with constraints, such as values and a code of conduct, homework, evaluations and standards, but also with positive experiences, such as sports, artistic projects and an enjoyable atmosphere.

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4.   A round table is a body made up of representatives from various community, public, municipal or other organizations that intervenes in a given sector (geographic or activity-related).

• Having recourse to ways and means of overcoming temporary or chronic difficulties (e.g. loss of or decreased motivation, discouragement, loss of self-confidence, a sense of failure, problems dealing with a member of the school staff and the need to talk to someone who is not associated with the institution).
Plans of action to forge a strong alliance • Informal activities designed to break the ice before embarking on educational projects. • Use of existing cooperative and informational bodies and mechanisms to promote communication between the various partners (e.g. neighbourhood round table, governing board, bulletin boards, newsletters). • Guided tours (or open houses) in CLSCs, community organizations, and so on, for allophone parents, in order to correct the misconceptions they may have about these organizations.

Breaking down linguistic barriers

Before thinking in terms of communication and collaboration with respect to common objectives, it is important to ensure that key partners such as parents are able to understand what is being communicated so that they can play an active role.

Each partner's needs

<u>School staff</u>

- Having access to cultural[5] and linguistic interpreters in order to be able to communicate with allophone parents.

- Having tools and resources other than the school agenda and parent-teacher interviews for establishing contact with parents who are isolated because they do not speak the language of their new country.

<u>Parents</u>

- Having access to resources and tools that enable them to participate in their children's education, which may seem impenetrable because they do not speak the language of their new country.

- Being recognized as able partners and educators in their own right, regardless of their difficulties expressing their needs and opinions.

<u>Students</u>

- Having access to linguistic support.

- Having access to places and activities outside the school that enable them to perfect their knowledge of the language spoken in the classroom.

Plans of action to forge a strong alliance

- Use of an existing or a newly created bank of interpreters in order to organize meetings with parents, individually or according to linguistic sub-groups, through the intermediary of intercultural organizations that can provide expertise and resources.

- Linguistic twinning projects involving parents, students and families.

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5. Cultural interpreters are skilled not only in translating messages, but also in decoding verbal and non-verbal language based on the specific reference systems of parents and the school staff.

Bridging the information gap

Access to information is the first step toward communication and partnership between the school and the community. Partners require a minimum of information about each other to avoid running the risk of duplicating initiatives already in place, while overlooking other needs. Furthermore, if students are not sufficiently informed, they will not take full advantage of available community resources.

Each partner's needs

<u>School staff</u>

- Knowing the resources available in the community, particularly the services, projects and programs geared toward educational success.

- Being aware of collaborative and consultative bodies that exist in the community and that include school staff representatives.

- Understanding the family and cultural context of parents who have recently immigrated.

- Understanding the values and approaches that form the basis of the partners' intervention (e.g. What are they doing? Why are they doing it? How do the services they offer improve rather than hinder school life?).

- Understanding the values and needs underlying the way some parents behave. Why do some parents not attend meetings with staff although they attach great importance to their child's educational success? Is there a discrepancy between the parent's desire to participate and the staff's expectations? What are the cultural, socio-economic or family realities that encourage or impede collaboration?

<u>Parents</u>

- Being aware of resources available within the community.

- Understanding the consultative and decision-making bodies that include representatives of parents, such as the governing board, which is a new body that parents are not yet familiar with.

- Understanding how Québec schools operate in general (especially for newly arrived immigrants).

- Understanding the school context in which their child is evolving as well as the choices underlying the school's educational project and code of conduct.

- Understanding the educational values advocated in Québec.

<u>Students</u>

- Being more aware of the resources available both at school and outside the school.

- Understanding the role of their representatives on consultative bodies.

- Having access to a variety of effective information tools. For instance, crowded bulletin boards are ineffective, and if too many brochures are distributed, they will not be read or kept. It is important to provide feedback on information already transmitted, so that the appropriate resource can be contacted quickly in an emergency.

- Being able to share the values communicated by the school as well as their underlying objectives in order to understand the reasons behind institutional restrictions.

- Understanding the importance of certain resources and overcoming the fears about using them, especially when it involves dealing with certain types of problems (e.g. isolation, abusive situations such as taxing and physical abuse).

Plans of action to forge a strong alliance

- Meetings with institutional and community partners so that the entire staff is informed of projects that are or may be offered during the year in support of educational success.

- Meetings to discuss educational practices used in the country of origin of allophone students whose nationality is strongly represented within the school.

- Information meetings on the needs of the school and parents, services offered, unanswered needs, and so on in order to guide partners towards actions that complement those taken by the school.

- Information activities for parents on resources available within the community and on specific aspects of school life (e.g. services and particular projects, how the governing board works), in order to supplement written information as well as information provided at the annual general meeting.

- Convening meetings with allophone parents according to linguistic sub-groups in order to discuss how Québec schools operate in general (e.g. educational levels, evaluation, pedagogical days) and how their child's school functions (e.g. services, projects, values and code of conduct, educational project).

- Projects that twin immigrant families with Québec families, so that they can get to know each other better, dispel misconceptions, and above all lessen the burden on allophone students as the only intermediaries between Québec society and their family (being solely responsible for their parents' integration can hinder children's educational success).

Making a concerted effort to find solutions to common problems

Cooperation between the school and the community is a multi-stage process. First, contact must be established, which involves breaking down organizational and linguistic barriers. Second, more information must be exchanged to foster better mutual understanding. Third, it is important to work together, based on common needs, in order to remove the obstacles to educational success.

Each partner's needs

<u>School staff</u>

- Being able to team up with various partners in order to share the responsibility for students' educational success and socialization.

- Being able to break down isolation by establishing a partners' network which parents and students can turn to when experiencing difficulties that fall outside the school's authority or jurisdiction (e.g. dysfunctional families, poverty, undernourishment and other problems that threaten educational success).

- Being able to ensure rapid access to community resources that can meet young people's needs.

- Being able to develop a coordinated approach with partners in order to avoid sending contradictory messages to students.

<u>Parents</u>

- Having an opportunity to share their questions and opinions about their child's school and social life (outside parent-teacher meetings).

- Having information on community resources that could provide them with support (e.g. mediation and guidance).

- Being able to offer educational support.

- Being able to detect educational or behavioural problems their child may be experiencing.

- Being able to improve communication with their child.

- Being able to resolve conflicts or prevent their child from dropping out of school.

<u>Students</u>

In this case, student needs were grouped into four categories[6]:
- *Educational sub-measures:* e.g. academic upgrading, remedial work and homework assistance, projects to promote motivation in school, support for school organization and time management, support for individuals who are going back to school.

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6. Educational success depends on a combination of factors that are impossible to compartmentalize. The following sub-measures should not create an artificial barrier between socio-affective and educational aspects, but rather help determine the factor to be emphasized in certain projects geared toward educational success, and should take into account the interrelationship between various factors.

- *Socio-affective sub-measures:* tutoring projects that provide strong role models for students, projects designed to develop self-esteem, psychosocial support.

- *Socio-cultural sub-measures:* projects that counter idleness, and foster motivation, perseverance and team spirit (e.g. arts, sports).

- *Socio-economic sub-measures:* e.g. food programs, places where students can rest, recreational activities offered on weekends.

Plans of action to forge a strong alliance

- Classes that offer academic upgrading, remedial work and homework assistance.

- Tutoring projects that provide students with strong role models.

- Extracurricular activities to counter idleness and develop perseverance and team spirit (e.g. arts, sports).

- Food programs, leisure activities.

- Activities designed to enhance self-esteem and motivation, or to improve school organization and time management.

- Psychosocial support.

- Support for students who are going back to school.

- Workshops on communication between parents and children or on particular problems (e.g. taxing, suicide, dropping out of school, violence, drug abuse).

- Workshops to promote consistency between the values of the school and family values.

- Mediation services as well as crisis management and prevention services.

- Support for intervention in multiethnic contexts.

STATEMENT OF UNDERSTANDING
(EXAMPLE)

A strong partnership is built on mutual trust and voluntary participation. It is also important, however, to set up mechanisms to guide collaborative undertakings. To that end, a statement of understanding can be a useful tool, particularly since it allows the various partners to clearly define their respective expectations, objectives and roles. The following statement of understanding is provided as an example only. Partners are free to develop their own tools.

STATEMENT OF UNDERSTANDING
(EXAMPLE)
Partnership project involving a school and a community organization

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SECTION I: THE PARTNERS

SCHOOL

Name:

Address:

Telephone, fax (e-mail, if applicable):

Principal:

Project coordinator:

COMMUNITY ORGANIZATION

Name:

Address:

Telephone, fax (e-mail, if applicable):

Director:

Project coordinator:

OTHER PARTNER(S) (if applicable)

SECTION II: THE PROJECT

PROJECT NAME

PROGRAM NAME

- The Supporting Montréal Schools Program, strengthening ties between schools and communities

PROJECT SUMMARY

- Describe the project and the activities involved.

- Who is the project designed for (target group)?

- What are the objectives?

- What are the expected outcomes?

SECTION III: RESPONSIBILITIES

Describe the nature of the contribution expected from each of the two partners as well as the extent of that contribution, in terms of the following:

THE SCHOOL'S COMMITMENT

- Human resources

- Material resources

- Financial resources

- Concrete tasks and actions

- Other types of contributions (to be determined according to the nature of the project)

THE COMMMUNITY ORGANIZATION'S COMMITMENT

- Human resources

- Material resources

- Financial resources (if applicable)

- Concrete tasks and actions

- Other types of contributions (to be determined according to the nature of the project)

SECTION IV: THE MECHANISMS

INFORMATION MECHANISMS

What channels do the parties plan to use to exchange information vital to the success of the project and how often do they intend to exchange such information?

COMMUNICATION MECHANISMS

Various arrangements (e.g. location, frequency and guidelines) that enable both parties to communicate openly and meaningfully throughout the course of the project:

- through representatives designated by the school and the community organization?

- through the administrations of the community organization and the school?

- through coordination meetings held monthly, at the end of each stage in the project or as needed?

- through other means?

IMPLEMENTATION MECHANISMS

- Planning

- Organization

- Coordination

- Contingency plan for unforeseen situations, problems or conflicts

EVALUATION MECHANISMS

Guidelines and methods determined by each of the two parties in order to evaluate results in relation to the objectives and the expected outcomes (e.g. assessment tools, progress reports).

PERIOD COVERED BY THE AGREEMENT

FROM..TO..

Cancellation clause

Renewal clause

SIGNATURE

_____   _____
School representative   Community organization representative

CONCLUSION

Clearly, the experts who prepared this document and the related tools were not interested in reinventing the wheel, but rather in developing a practical tool for structuring cooperation between schools, families and communities. The approach involves building on existing needs and resources in order to create a strong partnership dedicated to educational success. By building on existing elements, each partner can take control of the process involved in joint action and, in so doing, partners can define their own responsibilities and expertise as well as their needs and limitations within the project. Lastly, this approach encourages networking and ensures that the various interventions complement one another. This vision, which informed the discussion group's work throughout the process, will no doubt be well received by all of the partners concerned.

APPENDIX – MEMBERS OF THE DISCUSSION GROUP ON FORGING TIES BETWEEN SCHOOLS AND COMMUNITY ORGANIZATIONS, 1998-99

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Chantal Grandchamp, President, Alliance des centres d'éducation populaire

Yves Joannette, Coordinator, Table régionale des organismes volontaires d'éducation populaire (TROVEP de Montréal)

Marie Lahaie, Principal, École Barthélemy-Vimont

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Colette Lebel, Principal, École Maisonneuve

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Ken Monteith, Director, À deux mains - Head and Hands

Daniel Paquin, Director, Projet 80

Maurice Poirier, Chairperson, Regroupement des organismes communautaires d'intervention auprès des jeunes décrocheurs scolaires potentiels ou réels de l'Île de Montréal (ROCIDEC)

Jacques Rousseau, Principal, École Pierre-Dupuy

Beverly Townsend, Principal, Coronation School

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