



# Twelve Steps to Thriving School Partnerships: **Get Started Guide**

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# About

## **Jeremy Del Rio, Esq.**

Jeremy R. Del Rio, Esq., co-founded and leads Thrive Collective, a nonprofit that empowers students and schools to thrive by mobilizing students, families, and community groups to partner with schools for sustainable change. He also teaches youth and community development at Alliance and Fuller seminaries; and connects, trains, and mentors youth workers nationally. He has consulted businesses and nonprofits on leadership and strategy since 2000; and co-founded and directed Generation Xcel, a holistic youth center in Manhattan, from 1996-2006. Jeremy was the founding youth pastor at Abounding Grace Ministries (1994-2004), and also worked as a corporate attorney at Dewey Ballantine in New York before resigning after 9/11 to lead relief work at Ground Zero. He has contributed to six books, and his articles have appeared in dozens of publications. Jeremy received his BA (with honors) and JD from New York University, and certificates in non-profit management and leadership from Columbia University's Graduate School of Business and the DeVos Urban Leadership Initiative. He and his wife Diana have two sons, Judah and Cyrus.

## **Thrive Collective and SchoolPartners.NYC**

Thrive Collective creates hope and opportunity through arts and mentoring in public schools. In 2016, Thrive Collective's core arts and mentoring programs worked with 2,800 students in 23 schools, producing fifteen school murals totaling 7,000 square feet, three music recitals, forty student films, three film festivals, a South Bronx Arts festival, and a citywide Art Exhibit. 100% of graduating seniors from Thrive's School Mentors programs were accepted into college.

Thrive Collective also catalyzes, coaches, and supports school partnerships that improve educational and life outcomes for students through SchoolPartners.NYC, a growing network of service providers convened by NY CityServe. SPNYC shares best practices, ideas, and resources in support of New York City's 1.1 million public school students and nearly 1,800 public schools. In 2016, more than 120 community partners provided 150 programs and services that together served 53,000 students at 100 schools in 25 NYC public school districts.

*You're convinced... You get it...  
You're ready to partner with a  
local school to empower  
students to thrive.*

**Now what?**

# It's time to get started.

This Get Started Guide walks you through a twelve step pathway of cultivating a meaningful partnership with a local school.

By "pathway," we mean actually doing stuff. Not just talking or thinking about how good it would be to do something someday.

By "meaningful," we mean more than pizza parties and service projects.

*Don't worry-- pizza parties and service projects are great. In fact, we recommend them as essential milestones towards building trust (Step #7). But our goal isn't simply to entertain students or facilitate drive-by volunteers.*

PART ONE

# From Projects to Partnerships

## The Reasons We Partner– Our Goals

The reason we partner with schools is to make a real difference in student lives. The kind of difference that actually improves educational and life outcomes.

Resourcing schools as authentic, trusted partners is a means to that fundamental, transformational end. **Our goal, simply stated, is students and schools that thrive — without exception or condition.**

## School Partners NYC– Our Vision

The School Partners NYC envisions a world where the promise of public education is realized equitably across demographics and neighborhoods, regardless of students' race or economic status.

We see a pipeline of student leaders in every city school creating a culture of achievement and service in classrooms, student clubs, and neighborhoods.

We see students graduating college and career ready, proficient in math, reading, and other academic disciplines and equipped with the character necessary to maximize their full potential.

We see an open-sourced standard of excellence replicated in city school districts and sustainable because of the responsibility shared by students and community partners.

**But we're not there yet.**

## Empty Promises No More– Our Opportunity

The tenth largest city in America fills New York City public schools everyday — 1.1 million students. Nearly half a million of them are economically poor. We offer education as their pathway out of poverty, and promise them that graduating high school adequately prepares them for the future.

Sadly, that promise rings hollow for as many as 3 in 4 NYC graduates, plus those who drop out. Among those who do what we tell them (graduate) too many finish their public education unprepared for college or careers. Remedial courses in college exhaust financial aid without moving them towards a degree. Or a job.

New York is not alone. Nationally, the average graduate of low-income school districts reads at an eighth grade level. Try completing college as an eighth grader. Try competing in an information economy — where literacy is currency — at fourteen.

Try, and in all likelihood, fail.

This educational inequity — where the place of one's childhood dictates access to quality education — has been called the injustice issue of our day. Every American President since Lyndon Johnson has made reforming public schools a national priority.

The results have devastated our City, and our country, for half a century.

*That's why you're here—  
You've seen the need  
and heard the cries of  
generations. You're ready,  
as Ghandi admonished, to  
be the change you hope  
to see in the world.*

PART TWO

# Foundational Principles

## **Core Values– Principles Guide Us**

We're in this for the long haul. With universal pre-k, NYC public schools now have a fourteen year window to prepare students for life. Including public colleges and universities, that window widens even further. It's not the government's job to educate our children alone. The communities that surround our schools must embrace a similar long-range vision to insure sustainable thriving from generation to generation.

To that end, our partnerships and initiatives rest on a foundation of four core values, principles that guide how we engage every school relationship and initiative.

### **HUMILITY (SERVE, NOT SAVE.)**

Successful partnerships originate from a posture of service. You are not "rescuing" the school or "saving" its students. You are supporting and enhancing the great work already taking place inside the school everyday.

### **CULTIVATION (TEND THE GARDEN.)**

Beauty already exists at the school, and the experts who can help you find it are the students, parents, and staff. Allow school stakeholders to guide you as you cultivate that beauty so it flourishes.

### **INTEGRITY (NEVER, EVER BAIT AND SWITCH.)**

If you agree to provide tutors for the STEM program, don't recruit artists and insist on the production of a mural. If you're volunteering at a school event, don't hijack the event to advertise your offsite program. Maintain integrity, or rightly forfeit your relationship.

### **EXCELLENCE (UNDER PROMISE AND OVER DELIVER.)**

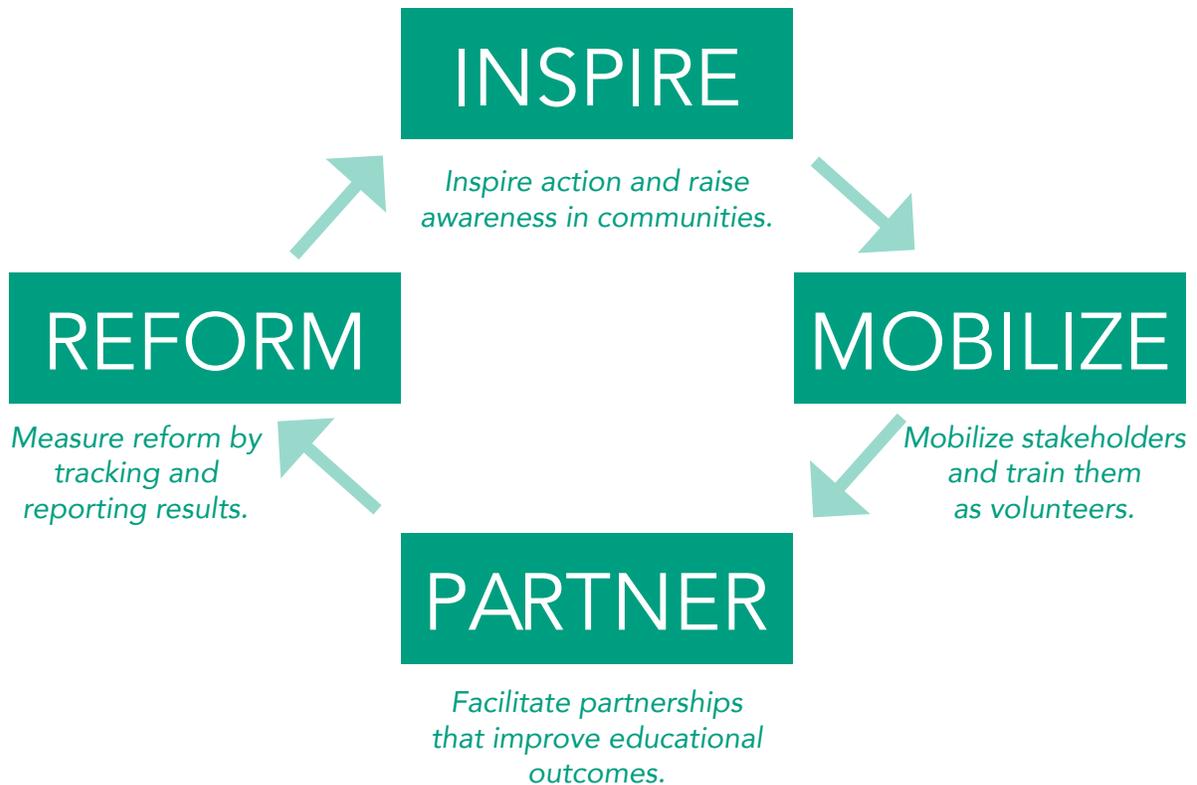
As trust matures, you'll find many opportunities to serve. Take your time. You can't do everything at once, nor should you. Prioritize one or two opportunities that you can perform excellently. Match felt needs at the school with your constituency's ability to meet those needs. Start with discrete projects. Then support ongoing programs and services. As you honor commitments and exceed expectations, trust and impacts deepen.

PART THREE

# Partnership Cycle

## Maturing Partnership Cycle– Growing Influence

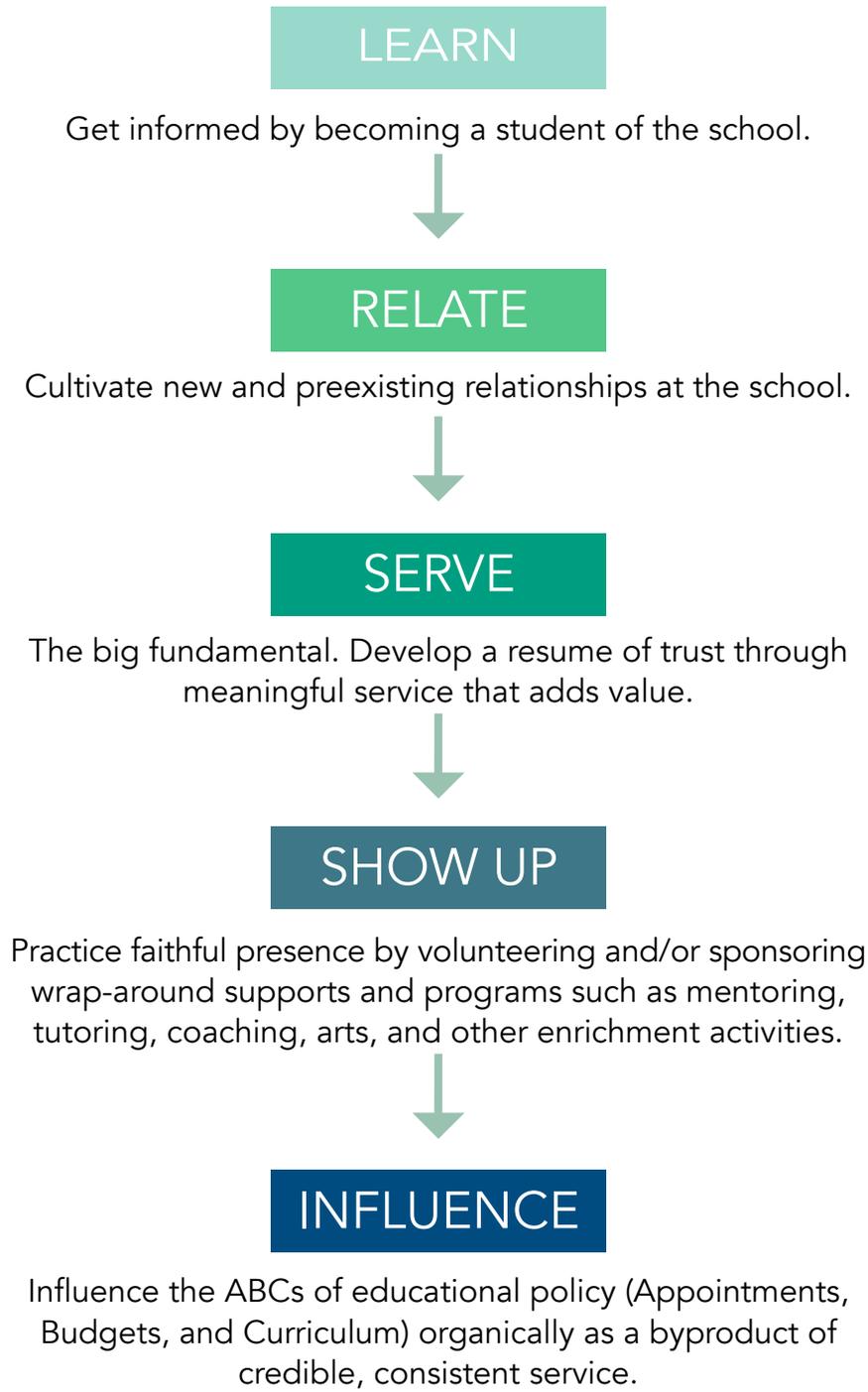
A maturing partnership cycles through seasonal rhythms. Often, they look like this:



Champions like you hear the vision and are inspired to start something. You mobilize and equip community volunteers to join the movement while crafting win-win partnerships with local schools. Your actions add value and produce meaningful impacts, which you vigorously track to insure accountability. You share the results and tell the stories transparently, thereby inspiring further improvements and greater action. And the cycle continues.

## Continuum of Influence

As your relationship with the school deepens, it follows a continuum of influence from insignificant to great.



PART FOUR

# Twelve Steps

## Twelve Steps– How Do We Get There?

While every school partnership emerges uniquely, the path forward generally follows twelve basic steps.

### INSPIRE

1. Hear the vision. Every journey begins with a call and an insatiable desire to do more. Champions see the opportunity, and determine to make a difference.

#### TAKE ACTION:

Share the Get Started video and [School Partners.NYC](#) website on social media.

2. Qualify your interest. The chasm between interest and action is huge. Curious onlookers will not effect change. Are you sufficiently interested to do something? If so, let us know. Register with [SchoolPartners.NYC](#) today. Join the movement so we can share ideas, resources, and best practices for greater impact.

#### TAKE ACTION:

Register at [School Partners.NYC/register](#).

### MOBILIZE

3. Designate the team within your organization who will serve as the point leaders for any emerging partnership. This may be one person or a small group of people, but responsibilities will include acting as the primary liaison to the school, the vision caster to your constituents, and the coordinator of projects and programs. Deputize the team to lead. Now you know you're serious.

#### TAKE ACTION:

Specify 2-3 prospective leadership team members and invite them to join you.

4. Equip your team to lead well by availing themselves of the School Partners NYC network for ongoing training and coaching. Clarify your organization's mission and vision as it relates to school partnerships, and then prepare to execute well. Resist the urge to reinvent proven strategies. Link up with colleagues and peers so you can learn and grow together.

**TAKE ACTION:**

Notify us of 2 or 3 training or coaching topics that can help you succeed. Clarify your strategy with [this worksheet](#).

5. Identify prospective school (no more than two or three) within a short walk of your organization using our school finder. Become students of the school. Learn all you can about them, and determine which one might be the best fit for your constituents. Access educational data on the school's website through the Department of Education's school portal at <http://schools.nyc.gov>. Interpret the data using independent research from <http://InsideSchools.org> and other third party sources. Interview people from the school to hear qualitative, real world stories and anecdotal insights, not just quantitative data reports.

**TAKE ACTION:**

What two or three insights stand out (e.g. demographics, academic performance, parent engagement) and how might they inform service opportunities?

6. Cultivate school relationships. Survey your existing networks to identify prior relational connections to the school. As a community organization, you probably already know a teacher, custodian, other staff member, student or parent at the school. Invite one of them to open the door to the school. For example, parents have more influence and access than they sometimes realize. Set them up as the hero by engaging the school at their invitation and as their friends.

Approach the school with a posture of humility and service, and treat everybody with the utmost respect. The parent coordinator, custodian, a teacher's aid, a student you already know — your greatest ally may not be obvious at the outset. Nurture the relationship/s as you would any other. Engage conversations; take them for coffee; and listen more than you speak. The first meeting should be brief and to the point, unless the staff member offers more time. The second meeting should allow for real brainstorming of possibilities.

### TAKE ACTION:

Arrange a meeting at the school; introduce your interest in partnering and begin exploring possibilities for service.

### PARTNER

7. Establish a resume of trust by responding to the opportunities that surface organically during conversations. Remember, you cannot respond to everything, so don't even try. Instead, listen for discrete opportunities to add real value, and strategically match school needs with your organizational assets. Start with the small stuff, and build from there. Create win-win moments for the school and your volunteers to experience mutually beneficial experiences on campus. This is the perfect time for pizza parties and service projects. At the beginning of the relationship, projects will create the foundation for more meaningful programs and services to come later.

#### [Learn more about the shift from projects to partnerships](#)

#### **Appreciate. Beautify. Supply.**

Generally, service opportunities fall within three broad categories: appreciation, beautification, and supplies. Specific initiatives are limited only by your collective imagination. Appreciation initiatives express gratitude to teachers and staff, for loving our children well, and to students and families for creativity and service. Examples include breakfast in the teachers lounge during standardized testing week, or student awards during commencement. Beautification projects make a physical mark on the campus itself, like painting a classroom, planting a garden, or producing a mural. Supply initiatives provide school supplies, such as backpacks at the start of the year, adopting a classroom at key time during the year to prevent teachers from paying out of pocket for paper and pens, and restocking specialized classrooms like art or music rooms.

#### [Three #WeServe initiatives to get started with service.](#)

### TAKE ACTION:

Brainstorm and plan two or three service projects that will catalyze your resume of trust this year while you continue exploring program possibilities.

8. Clarify expectations by explicitly defining the scope of any given project or service. Specificity creates accountability.

Yes, you're reading this correctly. We're encouraging you to write "it" down, because "it" never self-defines. Partnerships crumble under the weight of misspoken expectations and assumptions, but they thrive where there's explicit agreement. No, you probably don't need to hire a lawyer, but a proofreader is a good idea.

### TAKE ACTION:

[Download sample action plans here](#) and customize them to your project or program.

9. Recruit and train volunteers to staff specific initiatives. Recruitment emphasizes the why and any particulars for the given opportunity. Be mindful that recruiting for a one day beautification event is very different than recruiting weekly mentors. Training should be appropriate to given initiatives. For service projects, training will often be no more than a brief orientation on site, the day of the project. But staffing programs typically requires a deeper level of training, such as mentor training, or specific curricula.

### TAKE ACTION:

Hashtag your fliers and recruitment announcements on social media with #WeServe and #SchoolPartnersNYC so we can help promote your opportunities.

10. Execute your strategy. When it's go time, never, ever leave a project unfinished. Even if everybody else bails, champions stand longest and go farthest.

**TAKE ACTION:**

Hashtag photos and social media reports with #WeServe and #SchoolPartnersNYC so we can celebrate your great work and it can inspire others.

**REFORM**

11. Measure your impacts. No one likes to meet just to meet. We're all too busy for that. No one needs more stuff to do cluttering their schedules. We engage schools and facilitate partnerships in order to make a difference. How will you know you've been successful without knowing where you started and how far you've come? Measuring impacts means just that: finding the right metrics to determine whether your programs or services matter.

**TAKE ACTION:**

Debrief all school initiatives. In addition to any program specific evaluations, we recommend a simple tool: Four Helpful Questions (What's Right? What's Wrong? What's Confused? What's Missing?)

**[Download the template worksheet here](#)**

12. Tell the stories. Inspire others with your successes or teach others with your failures. Either way, the legacy of your efforts will live long after completion when you share your experiences with those around you.

**TAKE ACTION:**

Share any photos, videos, newsletters, blog posts, press releases, or social media stories with us. Email us any links or footage we can use to help celebrate your efforts and inspire others: [stories@schoolpartners.nyc](mailto:stories@schoolpartners.nyc).

# **On-Ramps and Add-Ons**

## Collaborative Initiatives– On-ramps and Add-ons

Now that you know where you're going and how you'll get there, SchoolPartners.NYC offers a range of onramps and add-ons to help you take action. If you've never worked with a school in a tangible way, these citywide collaborations are onramps to begin. And if you already partner with school, they can add value and strengthen your efforts.

SchoolPartners.NYC coordinates strategic collaboratives that help start or strength school partnerships citywide. We call them "On-ramps and Add-ons." For community groups that have never before partnered with a school, these initiatives provide onramps to start a relationship. Where partnerships already exist, these efforts become add-ons to deepen trust and enhance impact.

### #WESERVE

Loving schools well through service catalyzes trust and demonstrates that you're serious about partnership. #WeServe organizes school-based service projects in three broad categories: Appreciation, Beautification, and Supplies.

World Vision and NY CityServe partner together with SchoolPartners.NYC and #WeServe to collect school supplies for NYC public school students. Going back to school can be intimidating, and not having enough supplies can increase the feeling of intimidation. Getting a new backpack or a new box of crayons can make a huge difference for a child at the beginning of the school year. \$10 can fully supply 2 kids for an entire academic year. Your donation can equip a child to succeed in school! [Learn more.](#)

### PROJECT 25

Project 25 is an annual, bicoastal student-led community service campaign. It began in San Diego in 2009 and came to NYC with SchoolPartners.NYC in 2015. Project 25 has helped fund thousands of students to creatively raise tens of thousands of dollars in service of others. [Learn more.](#)

### ASSEMBLIES

Hope Week provides theme-based motivational assemblies for public middle and high school campuses year-round. Our dynamic communicators include veteran NYC youth workers and musicians who inspire student action, achievement, and sustainable change. [Learn more.](#)