ENGAGING FAMILIES TO ENHANCE STUDENT SUCCESS

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School leaders today have to be more outward facing than ever before, willing to provide extended school services and work co-operatively with social services, health care professionals, and the local community.

—G. Southworth (2009)

The above quote was part of a "best practices" white paper created by the largest educational leadership organization in the world, based in the United Kingdom. It was written for a group of U.S. leaders who, in February 2009, gathered in Washington to provide the Obama administration with recommendations on the future course of American education.

This perspective, while on target and backed by more research than similar previously published reports, is not entirely new. Consider this quote from the widely publicized 1995 report of the

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National Education Goals Panel (1995): "By the year 2000, every school will promote partnerships that will increase parental involvement and participation in promoting the social, emotional, and academic growth of children."

Both research and common sense tell us that parents and educators share the same goal—student success—yet strong school/family/community partnerships are often elusive. There is no consensus on where the responsibility rests for ensuring parental involvement in schools (Blankstein & Noguera, 2010; Harris & Goodall, 2008; Murray, 2009), and the challenges are intellectually simple, but socially complex:

> Low-income parents are often suspicious of schools—they frequently have bad memories of their own time as students—and they commonly have little experience advocating for their children in school. The challenge in low-income communities is often to help parents overcome these suspicions and barriers, whereas the challenge in well-off communities is often to keep overbearing parents from disrupting school functioning. (Weissbourd, 2009b)

But the challenges reside not only with parents. In studying North American and European schools, Andy Hargreaves and Dean Fink tell the story of a powerful and charismatic school principal named Bill Mathews, who was determined to provide "a service to kids and the community." After considerable effort, survey data showed that 95 percent of staff were satisfied with the school, but only 35 percent of students and 25 percent of parents shared that satisfaction (Blankstein, Hargreaves, & Fink, 2010; Hargreaves & Fink, 2003).

Complacency or denial is sometimes a fallback position for an otherwise overburdened or confounded professional staff. How do we cultivate an "outward-facing" perspective among our leaders and teaching staff, and what are the high-leverage activities they can focus on to get the best results?

THREE PRINCIPLES FOR BUILDING POSITIVE SCHOOL–FAMILY RELATIONSHIPS

Schools that take a strategic approach toward becoming community hubs employ three key principles:

1. Mutual understanding based upon empathy and recognition of shared interests

2. Meaningful involvement of family and community in a variety of school activities

3. Regular outreach and communication to family and community

Mutual Understanding and Empathy

The first step toward building or repairing home/school relationships is to gain a common understanding grounded in empathy for students' families. This means that school staff must become aware of the specific challenges that affect many families and make it difficult for them to support their children's learning. Educators must recognize that many parents have had negative experiences with school and are afraid to become involved. They may be intimidated by feelings of ignorance and uncertainty, and they may assume that their children will experience the same kinds of difficulties that they themselves encountered while in school, particularly if their children have special needs (Meehan, Hughes, & Cavell, 2003; Rogers, Wiener, Marton, & Tannock, 2009).

Moreover, many parents are struggling just to make ends meet. Some are working more than one job and have little time to supervise homework. Others are grappling with layoffs, housing foreclosures, and lack of health benefits. Instead of penalizing children and criticizing their parents for lapses and failures in attendance or preparation, the school as community hub works *with* families to extend understanding and support. The understanding invariably comes from creating opportunities for a shared reality: going into the community to engage parents or attending functions of importance to families and their children. Cooperating on a Habitat for Humanity project, artistic production, or sports endeavor together—all are examples that are under way in schools throughout North America. Examples of support may include after-school homework centers,

family-friendly schedules and transportation alternatives, comfortable waiting areas with coffee and tea, and translators for school communications and face-to-face meetings.

Meaningful Involvement of Families in the School

According to Barbara Eason-Watkins, making parents feel welcome at school is easier said than done: "In many conversations I've had with parents and members of the community, they felt that most schools didn't want them to participate, didn't want them to be part of the school" (quoted in HOPE Foundation, 2002). Instead of telling parents to drop off their children and return to pick them up at the end of the school day, some schools invite parents in to volunteer. "Shooing parents away tells them, 'we really don't need you here, cut the umbilical cord,'" says school counselor Reggie Rhines at Icenhower Intermediate School in Mansfield, Texas (personal communication, 2009).

This feeling of being unwanted and shut out sometimes stems from parents' own early experiences in school. Those parents who struggled in their own academic careers may feel resentment, distaste, or even anxiety about interacting with school authorities. In other cases, language and cultural differences create barriers that make meaningful parental involvement in schools difficult, if not impossible. Parents who don't speak English may be hesitant to contact schools and unsure of how best to communicate with school personnel about their child's needs. In many cultures, educators are treated as having an authority and status that make families even less willing to ask questions or voice complaints (Blankstein & Noguera, 2010; Elias, Friedlander, & Tobias, 1999; Hill & Tyson, 2009; Noguera, 2003; Valdés, 1996).

Circumstances such as these make it obvious that family involvement in the schools is not something that occurs naturally or easily when cultural, economic, or racial barriers are not addressed. For every parent like educator-physician James Comer's mother, Maggie— whose "American dream" it was to see her children educated despite her minimum-wage salary (Comer, 1989)—there are many more who lack the knowledge, means, and will to make their children's academic success the top priority (Harris & Goodall, 2008; Weissbourd, 2009a).

Meaningful partnerships with parents must be purposely cultivated and planned for, especially when the school's focus is on instructional excellence:

There is a major difference between involving parents in school-ing and engaging parents in learning. While involving parents in school activities has an important social and community func-tion, it is only the engagement of parents in learning in the home that is most likely to result in a positive difference to learning outcomes. (Harris & Goodall, 2008)

Parents can be coached to help students learn to study more effec-tively, including early identification of problem areas, assuring opti-mum environmental factors (such as a consistent, productive study area), and tips on time-management or test-taking strategies. Schools can also cultivate family engagement with academics by bringing parents and other adults in to share their expertise and talents in meaningful ways and by creating parent-to-parent support networks.

Schools that focus on such support networks recognize the value of the contributions that family members can make to the achieve-ment of the school's educational mission. Other strategies for encour-aging meaningful parent involvement include parent-to-parent outreach, parent-led lessons in the diverse languages represented within the school community, parent-led clubs and activities, and par-ent mentoring or tutoring for students who need extra help. Sara Lawrence-Lightfoot (2003) reminds us that this can be as simple as asking parents, "What are *we* going to do to help students?" in place of the more off-putting, "What are *you* going to do?"

Parents or community members can serve as translators to facil-itate communication between the school and non–English-speaking families. Principals and teachers who lack the necessary language skills might also develop partnerships with local churches and com-munity-based organizations to help in doing outreach and providing translation to immigrant parents. Key to this is a genuine belief within the school that it *is* a community hub, as well as a willingness to look outward to the surrounding community to create parental engagement and satisfaction with the school (Department for Children, Schools, and Families [DCSF], 2008; Southworth, 2009).

Inviting parents into the school on a more informal basis can be an opportunity to provide a positive experience, expand the relation-ship between parents and the school, and encourage meaningful and helpful interactions between parents and their children. Reaching out to parents and inviting them into the school, and into the classroom, can inspire a cultural change for teachers. Parents must be given

clear guidance on what to do in the classroom so that they do not interfere with teachers, and teacher need to be prepared for the experience as well. Changing the school's culture to embrace and value in-class volunteers is a prerequisite for an effective parent volunteer program. If the teachers don't accept the idea of having parents in the classroom, it simply will not work.

**Regular Outreach and Communication
to Family and Community**

In effective schools, teachers and administrators go the extra mile to reach those children and families whose problems stand in the way of their full involvement in schooling. Part of reaching out is simply making staff members visible in the neighborhood at fast food restaurants, malls, and other places students and families are likely to visit.

Gary Burgess (HOPE Foundation, 2002) says that *wherever* you meet parents—whether at the barbershop, the gym, the church, or the community center—becomes the locus of your campaign to get them into the school. Recruiting parents is not an activity restricted to specific hours at specific places; it is a constant, ongoing process that is central to the operation of the school as a community hub.

Burgess (HOPE Foundation, 2002) recommends a "bring the mountain to Mohammed" approach for providing information about school activities and efforts to the community. In his district, school principals hold periodic informational meetings at local churches and other public meeting places. He notes that these meetings are sometimes better attended than those held at the school because parents and community members perceive them as less threatening and more convenient. Burgess also uses a teacher log to record all parent contacts and then evaluates the information with teachers. By formalizing, valuing, and monitoring these contacts, he has been able to change teachers' behavior.

Five Examples of What "Good" Looks Like

In spring 2009, the HOPE Foundation conducted a series of telephone conferences with leadership teams located in districts that have

comprehensively implemented the "Failure Is Not an Option" princi-
ples for at least 2 years. (Failure Is Not an Option is a program that
aims to help school leaders create successful, sustainable high-
performing schools. The work is designed around six guiding princi-
ples: (1) common mission, vision, values, and goals; (2) achievement
for all students through prevention and intervention systems; (3) col-
laborative teaming focused on teaching for learning; (4) data-based
decisions for continuous improvement; (5) active family and com-
munity engagement; and (6) building sustainable leadership capacity.)
Their leadership teams shared various family-engagement strategies
they have developed with us.

Monday Morning Newsletter

At Brooks Wester Middle School in Mansfield, Texas, Principal
Scott Shafer and teacher leaders transformed their traditional school
newsletter into grade-level "e-newsletters" that are distributed every
Monday morning via e-mail. The newsletters cover not just school
events, but academics, test dates, homework assignments, and con-
tact information for individual teachers.

Designated team members distribute the weekly newsletter and
respond to questions from parents who can easily hit "reply" for true
interactivity. Students receive extra points on homework assign-
ments for providing e-mail addresses for their parents, and teachers
receive a "carrot" as well: "I don't require lesson plans because the
newsletters are the lesson plans I need to see," says Shafer. Close to
98 percent of parents now receive the newsletter electronically, with
paper copies sent to the 2 percent without online access. On the rare
occasions when the newsletter goes out late, the school hears about
it from engaged parents. In addition, the school now receives far
fewer complaints from parents that they didn't know about student
assignments or school events.

Parent Orientations

At the Della Icenhower School (also in Mansfield, Texas), stu-
dent orientation is called "Ice Camp." But instead of simply telling
parents to drop off their children and return to pick them up at the
end of the school day, Principal Duane Thurston and the school

leadership team now invite family members to attend their own "Ice Camp for Parents." Families get to tour the school and ask any and all questions that come up. "When the kids come home talking about common areas or how and why their lockers are opened, the parents have a better idea. From the beginning of the year we want them to participate," says counselor Reggie Rhines. "We're taking on the Home Depot thing: 'You can do it, we can help'" (personal communication, 2009).

Parent Roundtables

At Williamston Middle School, in the Ingham Independent School District in Michigan, Principal Christine Sermak conducts quarterly roundtable meetings with parents. These meetings take place in the morning or evening, with emphasis on informality. "It's really taken the place of our parent/teacher association," reports Sermak. "I meet with parents, and we talk about things that are going on in the school. It's more parent education and communication, more two-way than me sitting up there with a PowerPoint" (personal communication, 2009).

Movie Night

At Shambaugh Elementary School in Fort Wayne, Indiana, the PTA hosts Movie Nights with a film projector and giant screen in the school gym. This regular event gives staff, students, and parents an opportunity to interact in a very informal setting. "We have amazing attendance," reports Principal Shawn Smiley (personal communication, 2009).

Culture Night

At Icenhower School, each academic team presents its own "Culture Night," celebrating the different continents of the world. The events bring in 60–70 percent of parents because they recognize that their unique cultures and ethnicities are being celebrated. Culture Nights include different foods, artifacts, games, and music. "Parents have really taken a liking to Culture Night," says counselor Reggie Rhines, "because it celebrates who they are and recognizes their culture."

From neighborhood walks that bring educators into the community to car washes that bring community members to the school campus, there are myriad ways for school leaders and teachers to meet families, introduce themselves and their philosophies, and ask parents what they need from the schools to increase engagement. This can serve as a foundation for what ultimately matters most: building family support for student learning.

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GETTING STARTED

As you begin preparing a family and community engagement plan for your school or district, first take a moment to evaluate your current status:

- How many community members participate as members of teams for various improvement activities in your school?
- How many parent volunteers does your school have?
- In what capacities are those volunteers used?
- Of the ethnic and cultural groups forming significant parts of the school population, how many are represented on school teams? As parent volunteers?
- What outreach initiatives have been undertaken to recruit community members, and how effective was each?
- What forums or meetings have been organized to explain school-related issues and answer families' questions?

Consider these strategies for engaging parents in genuine partnerships:

- Change middle and high school handbooks so that they emphasize the positive, identity-building opportunities that await students. Feature interviews and stories with graduates. Place less emphasis on disciplinary infractions, but do present school rules that contribute to the positive identity of the school.

- Develop positive feedback systems to show appreciation of social-emotional intelligence, small amounts of progress, and academic success. Create progress reports about progress of all kinds, and change report cards to include indicators of life skills that parents will understand and appreciate.
- Provide parents with multimedia-formatted guidance with regard to how they can support the work of the school from home.
- Create forums for dialogue about cultural and ethnic differences; create networks of parent liaisons comprising educators, parents, and community residents who can help new families of different ethnic backgrounds adapt to the neighborhood.
- Create opportunities for community service and more meaningful, widely participatory student government. Publicize what happens in these contexts so that parents can see what the school is doing and gain a better understanding of the interests and competencies of their children.
- Provide forums for parent discussions and mutual support around the various developmental issues, familial stressors, and parent–child communication concerns that can be expected during the adolescent years (Elias, Bryan, Patrikakou, & Weissberg, 2003; Elias et al., 1999).

CONCLUSION

We know from experience and research that good teacher–parent relationships improve student learning, development, achievement, and success at school and in later life (Allen, 2007; Blankstein, 2010; Epstein et al., 2008; Sanders, 2006). As educators and leaders, it's up to us to make our schools the welcoming community hubs where every parent feels engaged, every student succeeds, and failure is not an option for any child.

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