

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.”

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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,

to help their children (“efficacy”); (2) whether parents feel invited by both school staff and their own children (“sense of invitation”); and (3) the school’s responsiveness to family-life variables such as parental knowledge, time and energy, and culture (Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2005; see also www.vanderbilt.edu/Peabody/family-school/model.html). The process of bringing together schools and families, especially those families that are marginalized or harder to reach, involves welcoming parents and other adult family members, respecting and affirming any type of involvement a family member chooses, and helping both school staff members and family members to focus on the child and connecting on common areas of interest that contribute to a child’s education (Mapp, 2003).

TEN TRUTHS ABOUT PARENT INVOLVEMENT

The National Parent Teacher Association (PTA, n.d.) synthesized much of the research about family involvement into the following “10 Truths About Parent Involvement.” These truths offer a foundation on which to build a strong partnership between families and schools.

1. All parents have hopes and goals for their children.
2. Parents differ in their abilities and/or resources to help their children reach those goals.
3. The parent is the central contributor to a child’s education.
4. Parent involvement must be seen as a legitimate element of education and deserves equal emphasis with elements such as school improvement and evaluation.
5. Parent involvement is an ongoing process, not a series of events.
6. Parent involvement requires a shared vision, policy, and framework for planning programs and practices that are connected to student learning.
7. Many barriers to parent involvement are found within school practices, attitudes, and assumptions.

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Q. Why did you decide to pursue a communication audit?

A. We hadn't conducted an external audit of our communications program in more than 15 years. During that time, we had experienced tremendous changes in terms of how we communicated with our constituents. It seemed as if we continued to add programs and activities, but never thoroughly analyzed others that might need to be changed or removed. In discussing the issues with the members of my volunteer public relations advisory committee, we decided to pursue an external audit by a professional communications firm. Initially the response was not well received by the superintendent due to costs. However, I was able to leverage the volunteer PR professionals on the committee to help convince the superintendent and school board to move forward and treat it as an important investment.

Q. How did this audit fit into your overall communication research activity?

A. We conduct a random community opinion survey every 2 years to track overall opinions of the district, including our communications program. This audit was intended to provide more qualitative data to complement some of the quantitative data we already had.

Q. How did you communicate with internal and external audiences before and during the process?

A. We hit the messages pretty hard with parents and staff to let them know we wanted their opinions. We told them that their feedback would help shape the overall communications program in the future and that their comments would be anonymous.

Q. What were the kinds of questions or skepticism you faced from those internal or external audiences?

A. One of our focus-group participants attended more than one session on the same topic. She told me later it was because she was skeptical that each meeting would be handled in the same way regardless of who the participants were. She said she realized that she was wrong and that we were genuinely seeking the same input from all audiences.