Abbott Implementation Resource Guide

Engaging Parents, Families and the Community To Improve Student Achievement

By

Anne Henderson
Education Consultant

Education Law Center

Giving our kids a fighting chance

About the Author

Anne Henderson is an Education Policy Consultant at the Center for Law and Education in Washington, D.C. She is a consultant to school districts, state and national organizations, and research associations on projects and studies relating to federal, state, and local education policy, especially in parent and community involvement. Anne has written numerous articles, reports and books, including A New Generation of Evidence: The Family is Critical to Student Achievement (1994) and, with various co-authors, Learning From Others: Good Programs and Successful Campaigns (1996) and Beyond the Bake Sale: An Educator's Guide to Working with Parents (1986). Currently, Anne is developing a tool kit to accompany her latest report, co-authored with Anne C. Lewis, Urgent Message: Families Crucial to School Reform. Prior to her work with the Center for Law and Education, Anne worked as a Senior Consultant to the National Committee for Citizens in Education, the International Meditation Society, the New Jersey Department of Education, the U.S. Office of Economic Opportunity, and the Civil Rights Division of the U.S. Department of Justice. Anne has a bachelor's degree from Oberlin College and master's degree in Political Science from the Eagleton Institute at Rutgers University.

About Education Law Center

ELC was established in 1973 to advocate on behalf of New Jersey's public school children for access to an equal and adequate education under state and federal laws through litigation, policy initiatives, constituency building, and action research.

ELC serves as counsel to the plaintiffs in the Abbott v. Burke case – more than 350,000 preschool and school-age children in 30 urban school districts across the state. The *NY Times* (2002) said that Abbott "may be the most significant education case" since *Brown v. Board of Education. Abbott* has also been called the most important NJ court ruling in the 20th century (*NJ Lawyer*, 2000).

The landmark Abbott IV (1997) and Abbott V (1998) rulings directed the State to implement a comprehensive set of remedies to improve education in the Abbott districts, including universal preschool, standards-based education, adequate foundational funding and facilities, whole school reform, and supplemental or "at risk" programs. ELC is now working to hold the State and districts accountable for effective, and timely implementation of these remedies.

About the Abbott Implementation Resource Guides

With generous support from the Victoria Foundation and the Schumann Fund for New Jersey, ELC commissioned a set of resource guides designed to facilitate the effective implementation of the Abbott programs and reforms at the school and district levels. The purpose of the guides is to provide school management teams, central office staff, and others

with information on the legal requirements, latest research, and effective strategies for implementation of the Abbott remedies. The topics covered include: Standards Based Reform, Parent and Community Involvement, Special Education, and Bilingual Education. All of the guides are available on ELC's website: www.edlawcenter.org.

Table of Contents

INTRODUCTION

During the summer of 2003, a statewide committee of representative educational stakeholders on "cooperative rulemaking" was convened jointly by the Department of Education and the Education Law Center. The Supreme Court in *Abbott X* had directed the establishment of this committee to develop new regulations more consistent with the Abbott rulings than had been promulgated in the past. As a direct result of parent and parent-advocate participation on this committee, through regulations adopted by the Commissioner of Education on September 9, 2003, the role of parents and families was elevated to a new prominence. For the first time, the Abbott regulations contain a section on "Supports for parents and families." This section requires "schools to facilitate opportunities for families, teachers and other school staff to work together and get to know each other." (6A:10A-3.6(a)).

The Abbott mandates create other tools to assure improved parent participation and support for schools. Every elementary school must have on staff at least one full-time parent liaison to coordinate parent engagement activities, while secondary schools are authorized to have such a staff person if the need is documented. Further, and most important, all Abbott schools must participate in whole school reform, including a collaborative school-based team to assess, plan, budget, and oversee implementation of all programs and reforms. Each team must include representative parents and community members.

This chapter on parent, family and community engagement is designed to assist implementation of these important new opportunities for school-family partnerships. As such it is part of an Abbott Resource Guide series. While the series is designed to allow individuals to use each separate chapter as a reference tool, it is important to remember that each chapter is also nested within a broader context. The Abbott litigation and on-going efforts at eradicating

educational inequality, and standards-based reform are the most effective means we know of to improve learning outcomes for all students. In addition to this chapter, we strongly recommend that you refer to the Standards chapter of the series, which we view as essential to the Abbott implementation process.

As a reader interested in parent, family and community involvement, you may be looking for an overview of the value of such involvement, or for tools to help make it happen. Chances are, you're actually looking for both. This chapter is organized from the general to the specific. The Abbott requirements are discussed first, followed by the argument in favor of making the effort to engage parents and community members. This may be useful to the individual reader and also as a ready-made argument to present to others whose buy-in may be necessary in order to undertake programming or policies to engage parents and community. The practical references and resources come later in the chapter and in the appendices. These tools can be used in whole or part, however they may be useful to you. We know that involving those who have traditionally been outsiders can be threatening, time consuming, costly, and viewed by many as a non-essential in an environment where resources and energy are scarce commodities. It is our hope that this chapter will illustrate the flip side of the coin -- the great rewards, to both educators and learners, to be gained from engaging the other significant people in students' lives in their education.

WHAT DOES ABBOTT SAY ABOUT THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN SCHOOLS AND FAMILIES?

Engaging parents, family members and people from the community to support students and help local schools improve is a key feature of the Abbott decisions. This is wise, because the research is clear that involving families in education can improve student achievement. **In fact, when parents and families are involved in education, not only do children perform better in**

school, but the schools become better too. Practical experience also shows that families can make a real contribution to school reform. As early as 1990 in the *Abbott II* decision, the Supreme Court concluded the importance of "recruit[ing] parents to join parent participation programs and become involved with the schools and their school children."

The goal of this chapter is to offer some ideas and support to make such "recruitment" and "participation" happen. Three key sets of Abbott mandates relate to collaboration with families. The first set, establishing collaborative school-based decision structures, now termed "School Leadership Councils," applies to ALL schools in Abbott districts. The second set requires implementation of whole school reform, including the use of WSR models and/or other providers of technical assistance and professional development. For schools that work with a whole school reform model, the selection and implementation process can allow for broader parent, family and community involvement. The third set offers direct support for families and provides for their involvement in the day-to-day operation of the school. These requirements vary somewhat, depending on whether the school is an elementary or secondary (middle and high) school.

1. School Leadership Councils

The major vehicle for making sure that parents and community members have a voice in the school is the school leadership council, formerly called school management and improvement teams. Although only a few parents will actually take part on the SLC, they represent all the families in the school. It is through them that parents can make their concerns heard, raise issues, question decisions, and inform school staff about family and community priorities. The regulations say the purpose of the SLC is :

to facilitate participation of the principal, teachers, staff, parents grandparents or

guardians, and the community to develop a culture of cooperation, accountability and commitment, all with a focus on improving student achievement.

The regulations specify the basic ground rules for the SLCs: who will be on the teams, how they should be selected, and that they will need training and support. The regulations also state what the teams are supposed to do. Then local school districts must follow these rules to write specific guidelines for schools, such as size, composition, and election rules. At the school, the principal must set up the SLC, then make sure it gets the training and support it needs. This includes providing the time, space and materials (like supplies, access to school records and a copy machine) for the SLC to do its work.

SLC Membership and Selection. SLC membership must reflect the student population and the local community. The principal is always a member. In addition to teachers, and school support staff, membership must include parents and people from the community. The SLC may also include students.

Furthermore, the principal cannot hand pick the council. The school community must be meaningfully involved in selection, and the principal must give a broad-based notice before members are selected. Each group (teachers, parents, support staff, students) picks its own members. Once the SLC is established, the SLC shall vote on nomination of community members provided by the principal.

SLC by-laws. The Abbott regulations give parents and community members important protections. The SLC can establish its own by-laws, but it must observe these rules:

- A majority of the SLC must agree to the number and dates of meetings, as well as where and when they will be held. Their goal should be to make it possible for all the members to attend. The SLC must meet at least once each month.

- The SLC can establish subcommittees and work groups that must be open to all members of the school community, not just those on the SLC.
- No SLC member shall be compensated for participation unless such participation is after normal working hours and is covered by a collective bargaining agreement. In addition, any member of the SLC may be compensated for expenses incurred as a result of SLC membership.

SLC Responsibilities

Standards-based school improvement planning. The SLC has several important jobs. The first is to conduct a school-wide "needs assessment." This is a process for finding out what students need, what resources the school may require to offer a stronger program, and what the community needs to offer more support for students. This is an essential first step in the standards-based improvement planning process because it not only identifies areas of need, but also draws attention to strengths and may help prevent costly duplication of effort and resources.

But, what does standards-based improvement planning mean to the SLC and to the larger school community? Again, it is important to remember the context within which the Abbott litigation and remedies operate in the drive for equity and high standards of learning for ALL students. The SLC is a key part of what is called a standards-based education system. The State has set standards, called the Core Curriculum Content Standards, for what all students should know and be able to do. The entire instructional program of the school, including the whole school reform model if applicable, should be designed to make sure that ALL students meet these standards. It is vital that the district and schools clearly convey, and that families understand what the standards require of their children.

In addition, the State tests students every year to measure their progress in meeting the

core standards. These test scores provide important information about how well students are doing. The SLC should use this data carefully to decide what the school needs, and how to improve student achievement. It should also be sure that everyone in the school community, including parents and local residents, understand what the test scores mean, and how they reflect student progress (or lack of progress). To help teachers be more effective, the SLC must also advocate for and help to develop professional development around instruction and assessment in a standards-based program. It is both unfair and unrealistic to assume that teachers or parents will just naturally know how to teach all students to a high standard or that they will know how to effectively test and report students' learning outcomes. In many schools around the country, parents also take part in this training and coaching for teachers, or are provided with their own training. (For more on assessment, reporting and professional development in a standards-based context, please see the Standards Resource Guide).

Another important regulation requires SLCs to set up committees that include non-SLC members to work on different jobs. A committee might review the school's reading program, examine school achievement data for gaps in performance, or develop proposals for grants. The intent is to allow as much participation by non-SLC members as possible, so that more of the school community is drawn into the SLC's work.

The SLC also plays a key role in school planning. Currently, the regulations call for three-year plans that document all the regular, special, and supplemental programs and services that will be implemented and available in a school during a three-year period, with annual adjustments based on new or additional assessments of need. The regulations call for the SLC to adopt the plan or annual modifications based upon a majority vote.

Budgeting. The second major job of the SLC is to approve a school-based budget. Each school is given a budget by the central office for existing staff, materials, maintenance, and so on. This is called the maintenance budget. The SLC reviews this to assure "accuracy" and to determine if "the needs of students, faculty and the school are addressed." If the SLC concludes that more is needed or that funds need to be reallocated to provide a different program with additional funding, it may propose budget additions or modifications. All such proposed changes must be documented by the SLC. Having strong influence over a school's budget can give the SLC real power to change the school and also a realistic knowledge of available resources. The SLC must educate itself on Abbott specific funding available for supplemental programming for which schools must apply by demonstrating need. Though we are unaware of specific allocations of supplemental funds for parent and community engagement initiatives, the research reported later in this chapter and elsewhere demonstrating the clear benefits of such engagement to student learning should present a compelling argument for need.

Principal, teacher and aide selection. The third major SLC job is to recommend who will be hired as the building principal, once the council has voted to participate in the process and members have successfully completed district-sponsored training in personnel matters. The SLC provides at least three candidates to the Superintendent. The Superintendent may select one of the three candidates, or ask the SLC for more names. The Superintendent cannot hire anyone who is not recommended by the SLC. This means that, again, the SLC has a great deal of power to influence school policy and leadership. As part of the resume review and interview process, SLC members can choose to maintain priorities such as high standards for all students, parent and community involvement, and a caring learning community as they consider candidates.

Training for SLC members. Naturally, parent and community SLC members will not be

as familiar with education jargon, programs and procedures as the teachers and the principal. The Court recognized this, and provides that all SLC members receive training. Not only must the district offer training to all teams, but each new member of an SLC must also receive training. The regulations provide that training must cover these topics:

- The roles, relationships and responsibilities of the SLC
- Development and implementation of the three year plan and budget
- Needs assessment and continuous improvement
- Curriculum and instruction, including programs for special ed students and ELLs
- Teamwork, and consensus building
- Personnel selection and evaluation
- NCLB and other applicable laws and regulations

There are two other essential topics for SLCs to understand and grapple with in order to assure members collectively develop the capacity to fully implement the Abbott remedies. First, SLCs must be familiar with the process of whole school reform and the options of using a model or in the alternative, another provider of technical assistance and professional development, reaffirmed as the key process of local school improvement in the 2003 Abbott X Order. Second, SLCs must become familiar with the range of supplemental programs and services responsive to particular student and school needs. While needs assessment may indicate the need for school initiatives in certain areas, neither teachers nor parents are experts on the various options that may appropriately respond to this or that need. Thus, it is essential that the SLC receive training in the area of program and service options, depending on the results of needs assessment.

2. General Parent, Family and Community Involvement in Schools

Other regulations also offer support for families and provide that they be involved in the day-to-day operation of Abbott schools**.** The Abbott regulations direct schools to develop procedures for assuring regular contact between families and school practitioners; to operate a volunteer program to increase family participation in class and school-wide activities; to create and sustain an active parents organization; to conduct parent education programs as needed; to provide multiple forms of communication between home and school; and to annually assess the level and extent of family participation in order to plan any needed improvement in the friendliness of the school and other potential barriers to full family involvement and support.

Early childhood programs. Engaging parents in their young children's learning, both at home and at the program site, is a key strategy for improving student achievement across all the grades. The regulations require school boards in Abbott districts to develop community outreach and recruitment strategies to maximize participation in early childhood education programs. They also try to make sure that parents and children have access to needed health and social services, by requiring districts to offer:

- Family referral services for district-operated early childhood education and preschool programs
- Family workers in child care programs licensed by the Department of Human Services with which the board contracts one family worker for every 40 children being served by the early childhood education center

Elementary schools. Continuing the policy of family support in preschool programs, Abbott also requires that elementary schools have a Family Support Team. This team must be trained to meet the health, nutritional and social services needs of the child. Its job is to:

- Encourage parent involvement in the school and in students' learning
- Train parents for volunteer roles
- Intervene to resolve behavioral, nutritional, attendance and other issues
- Receive teacher referrals of students who are not making progress
- Make referrals to appropriate health and human services agencies

Middle and high schools. The Abbott remedies also require secondary schools to assist with the health and social service needs of students. Every middle and high school must have a community services coordinator to identify students' needs and arrange for community-based providers to furnish essential health and social services. Secondary schools explicitly authorized by the Court to request state funding for school based health and social services if the need for such services is documented. Although this language does not explicitly mention families, in order to address students' needs, it would seem essential to consult families about their children's needs and to inform parents or guardians of available services.

More generally, the regulations require middle and high schools to establish community partnerships, so that schools can collaborate with parents, community and businesses to enable students to achieve the Core Content Curriculum Standards

All Schools. The Abbott regulations also provide for additional programs in schools with a clear, specific need. The SLC must be able to show that students require more services or programs than the district typically provides. A middle or high school can also show that a certain group (or groups) of students cannot reach the Core Curriculum Content Standards without special programs. To determine if such a need exists, the SLC must do a needs assessment. The SLC must also confirm that it held at least one public meeting to hear parents, students, teachers, and citizens' input on the application for funds.

The Abbott mandates and regulations lay the groundwork for a strong, interactive relationship between schools, families and community members. This creates a healthy climate for lasting school improvement. Making this partnership real is a major responsibility of the SLC and the school administration. As James Comer says, schools may improve without engaging families, but they will never become truly good schools.

Below are three important steps to building the relationships that will be key to improving student achievement: developing a strong school management team, building support for students in the community, and nurturing extensive parent involvement.

Developing a strong SLC. Because the SLC plays a critical role, its members must be prepared to do the job well. A weak, rubber-stamp team that is dominated by the principal will not serve the school well over the long term. A strong SLC will help ensure the support of families and staff for the three-year plan. It will also help guide the school through the changes the plan will require. This means the school (and the SLC) will need to make sure that members are trained, understand their job, have access to information and further training, and can function as a team. All SLC members should also be encouraged to take part in professional development offered by the district.

The SLC is a major vehicle for ensuring that parent and community voices are heard. To take part fully, those members will need more training and follow-up coaching than professional educators. Community organizations, advocacy groups, and local colleges can offer important support. Not only can they help recruit parents and community members to serve on the SLC, they can also provide training, information, and networking for SLC members.

Building community support. Having parents and community members sit on the SLC is not a parent and community engagement program. It is just the first step in building such a

program. To build a community that will support the school, the SLC will need to reach out. Community developers like John McKnight and Jody Kretzman at Northwestern University, recommend mapping the community's assets. (See information about their book, *Building Communities from the Inside Out*, at www.nwu.edu/IPR/abcd.html) Who is active in the neighborhood? Who are the real community leaders? What are the strengths and talents of the local residents? Answers to some of these questions may be found by: taking tours of the neighborhood with community members as guides; interviewing long-time residents; and attending community meetings and events. It is also useful to build alliances with service organizations, local religious organizations, and youth programs.

The district should make sure that community groups are well informed about SLCs. They should know that SLCs must have parent and community members, and that they must engage families and the community in selecting and/or designing the thee year plan for the school. The community should also understand that the Court requires an open, fair decision making process. The components of such a process include offering training to SLC members, holding open meetings, election of parent members, and parent and community input into needs assessments.

The goal of building community support goes well beyond ensuring volunteers. Schools with a well-organized community get more attention from district staff and the school board. Schools can often serve as a base for community economic development. First, strong schools attract stable families with assets to the neighborhood. Second, schools can facilitate social and political connections for local residents. Third, schools can offer valuable information and education to community members, including GED and adult education programs, job training, childcare, and referrals to social services. Accordingly, the entire school community should be

fully informed about the school improvement plan and how it will benefit students.

Nurturing extensive parent involvement. Also critical is that the SLC create programs and policies to ensure that parents are involved in the life of the school and in their children's learning at home. In the past, when Abbott required WSR models, many provisions for parent involvement clustered around the elementary schools. This did not, and still does not mean that middle and high schools are expected to do less to engage families. The parent component was a more explicit component of the elementary WSR models, which simply meant that the elementary schools, which have a tradition of greater involvement of parents than the upper schools to begin with, had more structural support for this involvement through their WSR models. All the more reason that middle and high schools must make a concerted effort to alter the trend against parent and community involvement. Now that WSR models are optional for some schools, and more districts must undertake development of their own independent reform plans, it is crucial that schools at all levels work with parent and community members of the SLC and involve families more broadly. Research and practice clearly show that the need to engage families, and the positive impact on student achievement, is just as great in middle and high school as at the elementary level. And, in the case of standards-based improvement, it is particularly important that parents and those in the community who interact with students understand and reinforce the standards to which those students are being held in school.

When schools engage families and support their continued involvement, they are building family capacity to support children's learning. Family literacy programs, for example, contribute to a family's economic stability and improve children's reading skills. In distressed communities, schools can help to strengthen families. This can be done, not only by connecting families to social services, but also by helping them understand how the system works, and how to make it

work for them.

Schools can also help families build social capital. Robert Putnam, author of *Bowling Alone*, defines social capital as "connections among individuals" and the shared standards of trust and mutual interest that develop from them. In low-income neighborhoods, which are often plagued with crime and poor transportation services, residents tend to be isolated. When schools serve as community meeting-places, and offer social activities (such as family fun nights, pot luck dinners, class meetings), they help foster the connections families need to collaborate in helping their children.

Low-income communities of color, where many residents' first language may not be English, also need to build political capital. Political capital is the clout and competence a community needs to influence public decisions so it can get its fair share of resources and services. Abbott gives families and community members a seat on the SLC and provides for their input into major decisions about how the school will improve. This offers parents and residents the opportunity to exercise some voice and power.

WHAT DOES RESEARCH SAY ABOUT THE ROLE OF FAMILIES AND COMMUNITY IN IMPROVING STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT AND SCHOOL EFFECTIVENESS?

Over the past 30 years, a large body of research has documented the positive impact of parent and family engagement on student achievement. (See Anne Henderson and Nancy Berla: *A New Generation of Evidence: The Family is Critical to Student Achievement*, an annotated bibliography of the research published by the Center for Law and Education in 1994). In short, the research says that when parents and families are engaged in children's learning "at home, in the community, and at school" children do better in school, and the schools get better.

What are the benefits found in the research?

The studies document benefits not just for students, but also for families and schools. When their parents are involved, *students* gain:

- Higher grades and test scores
- Better attendance and more homework done
- Fewer placements in special education
- More positive attitudes and behavior
- Higher graduation rates and greater enrollment in post-secondary education

Families benefit, too. When schools help families understand what their children are learning, families develop more confidence in the school -- and in themselves as parents. Teachers respond by expecting more of their students and holding higher opinions of parents. As a result, parents often go back to school, or take advantage of programs at their child's school, to continue their own education. Not only does this strengthen the family, it also provides a powerful lesson to children about the value of education.

Schools and communities also gain. Studies show that schools that work well with families have:

- Improved teacher morale
- Higher ratings of teachers by parents
- More support from families
- Higher student achievement
- Better reputations in the community

The impact on schools and families is far-reaching. When parents are involved in their children's education at home, their children do better in school. When parents are involved *at*

school, their children go farther in school, and the schools they attend get better. Furthermore, children from low-income families and diverse cultural backgrounds gain the most when schools engage families. This gain can help bridge the achievement gap between low-income and middle class students. One reason for this is that teachers expect more of students whose families they know. The impact of teacher expectations on student achievement is well documented. In school, as in life, we get what we expect.

Although parent involvement often drops sharply between elementary and middle school, engaging families in education is as important in middle and high school as it is in kindergarten. The extent to which parents and families are involved in children's learning is largely determined by what schools do to engage them. The more schools reach out and encourage families, the greater the level of involvement. Most parents want to be involved, but may not know what to do. (Specific suggestions and tools follow later in this chapter). Furthermore, the more the relationship between families and school approaches a partnership, the higher the student achievement.

Equity and eliminating disadvantage: Involving parents is consistently effective in raising low-income students' grades and test scores. How much gain makes a program "successful?" Many programs are called effective if they raise achievement, even if the students are still below grade level. What Abbott requires is not just that students make gains, but that *all* students master the state's rigorous Core Curriculum Content standards.

Research on whole school reform programs (such as James Comer's School Development Program), suggests that well-designed programs with extensive parent involvement can boost low-income students' achievement to levels expected for middle-class students. There is no reason that this cannot also be true of school or district developed improvement plans as

well. In fact, it stands to reason that "home grown" improvement plans, that take into account the *unique* population of parents and community members affiliated with the local schools might be even *more* effective and demonstrate *greater* gains for students. The key factor seems to be that the programs have a "partnership" relationship with families. This means that parents are encouraged -- and supported -- to do more than help their children at home and volunteer at the school. In schools that practice partnership, parents become advocates for their children and take part in making decisions about the school's programs.

Another group of studies looks at the impact of family income and social position on student achievement. Yes, students from low-income families tend to do poorly in school. But when the data are examined closely, what predicts achievement is not income, but whether families:

- Create a home environment that encourages learning
- Express high expectations for their children's achievement and future
- Press for high quality education, from preschool through high school

In other words, children from any family background can, and do, succeed in school. Schools can, and must, encourage and support families to be involved. This should include creating opportunities for parents to press schools to improve and to treat all children fairly.

Parent/community involvement in school reform: The research suggests that to improve achievement, parents and families need to be involved in several ways. Most schools are more comfortable with parents as teachers of their children at home and supporters of the school - chaperones, hall monitors, office help, reading tutors. The research strongly suggests that parents must also be able to advocate for their children - to make sure they are placed in high quality programs, get the help they need to succeed, and plan for their future. Furthermore, parents and

families should be at the table when important decisions are being made.

The most effective school reform programs:

- Build personal relationships between families and school staff
- Inform parents about standards, school academic programs, and teaching practices
- Engage parents in what is happening in the classroom and in looking at student work

Studies of Head Start, Title I, magnet schools, performance contracting and other programs to improve student achievement find a direct relationship between the level of parent involvement and the success of the school improvement program. In programs with nearly the same academic content, students' test scores rise as parent-family involvement increases. The more extensive and better developed the parent involvement, the greater the students' gains.

Urgent Message: Families Crucial to School Reform, a 1997 report from a national conference, contains several case studies of low-income schools that affirm the report's title. These schools deeply engaged families in improving the academic program - and student achievement has increased dramatically as a result. Not only are families involved in the daily life of the school, they are also advocates for high quality education, and partners in designing the reforms.

Here is how parents are involved at these improving schools:

- Parents sit on school standards teams and discuss how to improve academic quality
- Teachers and parents together take part in professional development

- Parent-teacher teams visit high-achieving schools to learn about good teaching practice
- A family center, staffed by parents, offers training on the district's standards, and helps parents monitor student progress
- Teams of teachers, parents and community members assess student portfolios using scoring guides
- Steering committees of parents and teachers designed and now run four, small, connected schools in one building

Many substantive changes resulted in these schools because of this higher level of parent involvement. For example, student report cards are aligned with state standards, so parents can better understand how their children are doing. Most schools adopted a major focus on literacy, so that all children read well by the end of third grade. Remedial reading is no longer needed in 4^{th} and 5^{th} grades, allowing teachers to focus on using reading to learn. In a high school, challenging electives such as journalism, anatomy, pre-calculus, and nutritional science are now part of the curriculum, replacing low-level general math and earth science classes. In all the schools, every open house, PTA meeting, and other school event has a focus on displaying and exploring student work.

A low-performing elementary school in Texas adopted vertical grouping, so that teams of teachers work up and down the grade levels. All children from each family are assigned to the same vertical team. In a high-crime neighborhood in Los Angeles, family center staff and parents worked with community groups to form a school readiness network. In response to parents' concerns, an elementary school in Louisville KY, totally revamped its reading program, added a science program, and adopted a year-round schedule. Community members also helped organize

and staff the after-school program. Student scores on the Kentucky state test went up 50% in four years. In all the schools, the student mobility rate dropped sharply.

In *Reasons for Hope, Voices for Change (1998)*, the Annenberg Institute for School Reform reported on 50 communities across the country that have engaged families and community members in developing and implementing major change in schools. In San Antonio, for example, community organizers from the Alliance Project helped to bring parents to the table at five high schools. As a result, there is a college scholarship program and job opportunities for graduates. In a few years, the number of seniors with a B average went from 19 to 61 percent, and the graduation rate rose from 81 to 92 percent.

WHAT ARE THE IMPLEMENTATION ISSUES ASSOCIATED WITH ENGAGING FAMILIES AND COMMUNITY MEMBERS TO IMPROVE STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT?

The Court's intent that schools collaborate closely with families and the community is reflected in its call for all stakeholders to embrace the Abbott reforms:

> **Success for all will come only when the roots of the educational system – the local schools and districts, the teachers, the administrators, the parents, and the children themselves – embrace the educational opportunity encompassed by these reforms.**

Throughout the new Abbott regulations adopted to provide the opportunity for all stakeholders, including parents, to "embrace the educational opportunity," are provisions that families are to be considered key collaborators in every Abbott school. That means parents, other family members, and people from the community should be involved both in school governance and in the life of the school. Beyond serving on the SLC and committees, parents and the community should understand what children are learning, be informed about student progress, look at student work in light of the Core Content Standards, and take part in developing plans for

improvement. This will not happen without the active support of school leadership and staff.

We know that this is hard work, and that you are encountering many obstacles. We want to recognize these obstacles here, then, in the next section give some suggestions for dealing with them. Sometimes it may seem that the state regulations are part of the problem. We encourage you to look beyond the complicated (and sometimes nonsensical) language to what they intend, and then move forward.

Engaging families and the community in school governance, and in the school itself, can be a serious challenge. Experts say that probably not more than 10 percent of all the schools in the country are doing a good job of engaging families. For years, education polls have shown that most principals and teachers rate lack of parent involvement in education as a "serious" or a "very serious" problem. From their side, parents often feel like outsiders. The Metropolitan Life Survey of the American Teacher (2000) found that about a third of parents feel "left out of things going on at their child's school" and "really do not know what is going on at my child's school."

In general, the data show that parent and family involvement:

- Is highest in early childhood (preschool and kindergarten)
- Declines each year in elementary school
- Drops sharply at middle school and then again in high school
- Declines as family income and education levels go down
- Drops as schools and neighborhoods become more culturally diverse
- Is lowest in low-achieving schools

While both parents and teachers agree that parents should be more involved, schools are not doing enough to reach out and engage them. *The Condition of Education,* published by the U.S. Department of Education, shows that in 1998 less than half of students attend schools that:

- Provide workshops about helping children learn at home
- Offer information about helping children with homework
- Provide information about helping children plan for college
- Ask for any parent input into key school policy decisions

Issue #1: It is difficult to recruit enough parent and community members.

Recent research and reports on school-based management teams found that schools all across the country are also struggling with parent and community participation. Some of the key reasons for this will not be a surprise:

Economic pressures: Changes in the economy and social structure present real barriers. A vast majority of women now work outside the home. Welfare reform and other pressures on low-income women mean that many have had to take more than one job to make ends meet. Single women head an increasing number of families with young children. Being active in the parent group or volunteering during the school day are not options for many of them.

Time constraints: Often, the number one problem cited by teachers and parents in surveys conducted by the U.S. Department of Education and other organizations, is lack of time. Many teachers are working parents, too, and all families are struggling to make time for their children at home. In the Met Life survey, about half of parents said they "do not spend enough time with their children."

Barriers of culture and class: In many urban areas, the composition of school staff tends not to match that of the community. To compensate, the SLC must have an ample number of parents and community members. Yet according to a study done by Elaine Walker at Seton Hall University, the average SLC has only one community representative and two parents for every ten members. In the past, this has presented problems when SLCs from schools with too few

community representatives presented funding or other requests to the state. Some requests were delayed or turned down on the basis of the SLCs failure to comply with membership composition requirements. In this time of transition and reform of state Abbott regulations, it is unclear, as yet, what will be done about this issue. Hopefully, greater assistance will be provided to schools by their districts and by the state in the future to facilitate community and parent participation and thereby ensure compliance with rules about SLC membership. Class and cultural differences present painful obstacles that school staff find difficult to discuss. Teachers and principals are middle class professionals, while a growing number of public school families are working class and poor. Many studies document the awkward exchanges and mismatched expectations that plague parent-teacher conferences, open houses, and family nights. Unless measures are taken to bridge these differences, families are reluctant to attend a school event, much less sit on a school management team.

Ban on school employees: Another major obstacle in New Jersey is the regulation that parent and community SLC members may not work for the school. In urban areas, school districts are a major employer. Many people fill jobs such as crossing guards, school secretary, classroom aide, which makes them unable to sit on the SLC. Teachers and the principal, on the other hand, are always school employees. Part-time unclassified staff can still make a contribution to the SLC through committees and attending meetings, and their input should be actively sought. They can also play a role in recruiting parent members. SLCs will need to reach out to community groups, religious organizations, and local leaders to recruit more parents, family members and people from the community. Once the school has established a strong parent involvement program, the recruitment problem should ease.

Issue #2: Parent and community members need training and support to participate fully and effectively.

Parent and community SLC members generally are not as vocal and active as teachers and administrators. This is often because they are not as familiar with education issues and do not have as much support. In many schools, neither parents and other family members, nor teachers are used to working collaboratively.

Little preparation: Few teacher education programs prepare teachers to engage families, especially in multi-cultural and low-income settings. Neighborhoods often change faster than schools do, so that the staff of the school may not speak the language or understand the culture of the immigrant and refugee families who are moving in. In neighborhoods where school staff feel "unsafe," schools are often closed and protective.

Parents are also unprepared to work with schools and teachers. They are not familiar with the standards their children are supposed to reach. They do not know about positive changes in teaching practice. And many do not have the resources to organize and advocate for their children.

Need for training: The regulations provide that all SLC members receive training, but some will need more than others. The principal, teachers, and other school staff are already familiar with education terms, how the school system works, school reform issues, curriculum development, student achievement data, and so on. They are connected to their colleagues in the system, such as the principal's organization, the unions, and the school district staff. This means the professional members get automatic support and assistance. This is part of their job, and they are being paid to do it. It also means that educators may easily fall into a "we-they" mentality, however unintentionally, thereby presenting the impression of a "closed" group. For laypersons unfamiliar with jargon and school procedures, such an atmosphere could make an awkward

environment seem downright hostile.

To compensate, the district, school and state education department should make sure that parents and community members have equal access to reliable information and expert advice. This is easier said than done. Providing access to information and expertise that has traditionally been reserved for "insiders" is both work-intensive and uncomfortable. However, it is necessary if parents and community members are to be full and meaningful members of the team. This means not only providing information in a user-friendly format for lay persons, but also providing the time and tone at meetings that will invite participation and questions from parents and community members. It also means that whoever is facilitating meetings and distribution of notes must be willing to not only model this approach, but also take on the sometimes uncomfortable task of reminding others to do the same.

Unequal compensation: Family and community members are volunteers with busy lives and jobs that make many demands. In some districts, teachers get extra compensation for serving on SLCs, which may create bad feelings between parent and community members who get no pay at all. The regulations do allow parents and community members to be reimbursed for expenses, however. Covering transportation, childcare, and other expenses, as well as providing meals, can help ease the disparity.

Co-opting: Too often, parent and community members tend to get "co-opted" by the school and lose contact with the people they are supposed to represent. For one thing, parent and community members depend on the school - for information, for agreement to set convenient times and places for meetings, for access to copy machines and computers. This creates a subtle pressure on them to "cooperate." If the school is criticized or questioned, parents are often expected to be "loyal" and put on a "united front." Unless SLC members remain independent and

well connected to their base, they will lose their credibility. Each SLC member should be expected to meet regularly with the people they represent.

For all these reasons, parent and community SLC members will need to cultivate contacts and support outside the school. Community groups, religious organizations, service agencies, and neighborhood associations can help turn out families and residents for important events and meetings. They can also recruit SLC candidates. The legal aid society, the education department of the local college or university, community organizing networks such as ACORN and the Industrial Areas Foundation, can be independent sources of advice, political support, and information.

An organization such as a local education fund or an advocacy group active in education can serve as an intermediary. For example, the Institute for Education and Social Policy in NYC, Designs for Change in Chicago, and California Tomorrow in Oakland, help recruit and train parent and community members of school councils. They also assist councils with reporting, research and data analysis.

Issue #3: Many SLC members, parents and teachers alike, feel unprepared to make important decisions about hiring, budget, and standards-based reform.

For the past 100 years, school boards and district staff have made all major decisions about schooling. No wonder that many local SLC members feel "unclear" about their role and responsibilities. According to the Seton Hall study, many also felt they "lacked the knowledge base" to design a whole school plan, hire qualified staff, and develop a school budget. Parents and community members are at an even greater disadvantage than teachers and the principal. As a result, they tend to defer or be silent. It is not surprising that SLCs tend to focus on issues

within the educators' comfort zone - curriculum and instruction, aligning teaching with the standards, and student assessment.

In Kentucky, a state that mandates school councils as part of its standards-based education reform law, an independent Association of School Councils provides training, data, technical assistance and other supports. At its annual conference, council members network, share approaches to school improvement, and hear from experts on good education practice. Larger districts also have a council association. The group is funded by the state education department, SMT dues, and foundation grants.

Kentucky also has a strong parent training program, run by the Prichard Committee for Academic Excellence, a statewide citizens' organization. It is called the Commonwealth Institute for Parent Leadership (www.prichardcommittee.org). In three two-day sessions, it offers interactive training that covers the following:

Session A:	Different learning styles – ways to help your child learn Research about parent involvement and student achievement The Kentucky education system and how it works Telling our education stories
Session B:	Gathering information about schools School improvement plans Skills and techniques for convening families and educators Model projects to engage parents
Session C:	Looking at student work in light of standards Using school data Networking with state and local resources Designing projects using a scoring guide

Issue #4: Most SLCs have not made it a priority to engage the larger community and develop broad parent involvement in the school.

Too often, SLCs have not set policies and created opportunities for broader parent and community engagement in the school. Teachers and administrators may not want to include "outsiders" in discussions of school problems, so tend to defer those to closed faculty or cabinet meetings. Few SLCs have created a committee structure that engages non-SLC members, leaving the major decisions to a small group dominated by educators. Yet research in Kentucky shows that school councils with working committees tend to be more productive, set policy rather than just react to events, and develop more experienced candidates for SLC elections.

The presence of community members on SLCs has a strong impact on the extent to which the school engages the larger community. The Seton Hall study found that SLCs without community members tended to vote according to the members' self-interest, rather than developing a sense of school-wide priorities. They were also more likely to defer to the principal and less likely to explore options.

SOME PRACTICAL TIPS FOR ENGAGING PARENTS AND COMMUNITY MEMBERS IN THE IMPROVEMENT EFFORTS OF ABBOTT SCHOOLS

All efforts to involve families and community members should be focused on improving student achievement. This is where the interests of families and school staff come together - everyone wants children to do better in school. The principal must take the lead in creating the vision and making it real. Without this leadership, nothing else will happen. The SLC must set goals and develop the policies to make them come to life. Parents and teachers must have a strong voice: what are their goals and what supports do they need in order to work together?

Strong parent and community involvement and a strong SLC go together. A key job of the SLC is to build an effective program that will engage parents and community members in the life of the school. As that program develops, parents will gain knowledge about the school and how to help their children. Then they will become strong candidates for SLC membership. In a similar way, as the school builds connections to community groups, candidates for SLC members will come forward. The SLC should have a committee dedicated to engaging families. The committee should include teachers, parents, and other school staff, such as someone from the front office, and a member of the family support team. Also include representatives of community organizations (e.g. churches, settlement houses, youth-serving groups, neighborhood advisory committees).

Despite problems like those we have discussed in the previous section, many urban schools have high levels of parent involvement. Because their families are under stress, these schools use varied strategies. They know that Roberts-Rules-of-Order business meetings, bake sales, back-to-school nights and parent-teacher conferences, do not work well. Instead, they directly address barriers like time constraints, economic pressures, and cultural mismatch. They help families get the community services they need, and go to bat for them if public agencies do not respond. They also encourage parents to become advocates for their children, help make decisions about how to improve the school, and be more active in the community. (See "Involving Families in Powerful Ways" in Appendix A.)

Developing a program

Let's look at some basic approaches to developing a program in a school where parent and family engagement has been low for many years. First, build trust and find out what families want. Next, reach out, as well as create a safe place for families to gather at the school. Then,

involve the whole family (fathers, children, relatives, close friends) and help people connect to each other. Finally, prepare parents and teachers to work together, and structure the school to promote those contacts. As you go, draw in community partners to help you.

Building trust and gathering information. This does not happen at old-style PTA meetings, where people sit in rows listening to a speaker but do not talk to the person next to them. It happens through one-to-one connections. As the Tellin' Stories Project in Washington, DC, says, "the key to building trust with families is to listen to and share their stories. Identify their priorities and needs. Then, in partnership, design your programs and policies." The first event that families request may be social, like a potluck dinner or a story sharing day. Schedule it when families and teachers can both come.

Take a good, hard look at how family-friendly your school is. A sample checklist is included in Appendix B at the end of this chapter. Is the entrance obvious and welcoming? Is the office staff polite and respectful to families? Is it easy to meet with teachers? Are there displays of student work that show the Core Curriculum Standards? Use the checklist as a model or create your own. Ask parents, teachers, community members, students, other school staff, the security guard and the bus driver, to go through the school and make comments.

What do families want? Develop a needs assessment of all families, to find out what is on their minds. Create a committee of teachers, parents and community members to design the survey. What do families like about the school? What do they think could be better? How do they want to be involved in the school and in their children's learning? What do they want to know about how their children are doing? What would help them be more involved? Use this information (plus the results from the Checklist) to design your program. (At a middle school in Kentucky, a math teacher and her class took on the task of tallying surveys and analyzing the

results).

Reach out, then welcome families into the school. Many parents do not feel welcome at school, even if they have never been there. It may be necessary to start by going out into the community, meeting families on their own turf. Public housing and apartment buildings with Section 8 units sometimes have community space - even a vacant apartment - that could become a homework center and meeting place. The family support team and other school staff can talk to families and residents at community gathering-places, like laundromats, parks, front steps and churches. Make home visits. The Success for All program in Baltimore organizes home visits over the summer, to answer families' questions about school and tell them what their children will be learning that year. Then they hold an orientation just after school starts. Attendance is high because families know what to expect.

Create a place in the school for families to gather. It can be a spare room, the end of a hallway (behind a partition or screen), or a corner of the library. To draw families into the school, offer services they want and can use. Do not guess; ask them what would be helpful. Many family centers are equipped with a stove, sewing machine, refrigerator, computer, books and toys to borrow, as well as useful information, like voter registration forms and immigration services. They also have a table, chairs and soft seating, like a used sofa. (See "Setting Up a Family Center" in Appendix C)

Involve the whole family and help people connect to each other. Include grandparents, uncles, friends and neighbors at school activities. Offer food and childcare, and transportation if it is needed. It is also important to have a good time. Activities like concerts, pizza dinners, family movies, games and story telling, are magnets for families. P.S. 261 in Brooklyn came up with a winning formula that more than doubled attendance at monthly parent meetings. Every

meeting has time for family fun, student performances, and a short business meeting. Every other month, the meeting is organized around a different academic subject, and students exhibit and explain their work.

Offer games and other activities that will help them mix and ask questions. Group people who have similar interests and concerns. Ask families to host gatherings to meet teachers and the principal in their homes. Follow up on the concerns that families may raise. If they are worried about children's safety on the way to school, for example, work with community policing staff to set up a safe house program.

Create opportunities for families and school staff to become friends. Teachers can create posters telling their story, with pictures of their family and of themselves when still in school. Families can bring in keepsakes that illustrate their family history. Plan activities for families collaboratively. Family Fun Nights, Girls (or Boys) Night Out, and Spaghetti Dinners - for staff and parents - offer non-threatening activities that bring people together. Aim for several smaller events, like class meetings, rather than a few large ones.

Prepare parents and teachers to work together. Teachers need support to work with parents. Devote staff development time to learning about the local community and new ways to engage families. Invite parents to attend these and other staff development sessions. They, too, would like to learn about conflict resolution, developing literacy skills, cooperative learning, and effective discipline. Talk to the local education fund about offering mini-grants to teachers for parent involvement projects.

Many schools now develop personal learning plans for each student. In the early elementary grades, parents and teachers draw these up. In upper elementary and secondary schools, students are included, too. Not only do these plans assess the student's strengths and

weaknesses, they devise a plan to help the student succeed. They also require the student to set goals for the future. This plan becomes the main topic of all parent-teacher conferences. In high school, the plans are a key check point in making sure students are taking the courses they need to meet their goals. Taking part in this process gives parents crucial information about the school's education program and what courses are required for college and other post-secondary programs.

Find out about strengths and talents among families and in the community. Invite people to come in to talk about their work, demonstrate a skill, talk about community history, or share their cultural traditions. Recognize that many families support their children's learning in various ways at home, even if they are not active at school. Wyman Elementary School in St. Louis did a homework survey and was amazed at the results. "We had no idea all the things their families were doing to help their children," the principal said. "Our teachers now realize what an asset they are."

In Washington, DC, parents in the Tellin' Stories Project organized community walks for school staff. They made a list of all the businesses, organizations, churches, and agencies they saw, and printed them in a resource guide. Many now help the school. For example a local dry cleaner repairs school band uniforms at no cost.

Do collaborative action research. Suppose attendance is poor. Set up a project to find out why. Create a committee of parents, teachers and community members to think about the problem and how to solve it. The family support team may visit families whose children are often absent to find out more. The committee can have focus groups with students to talk about why they miss school and what would help them come more often. If you are a middle or high school, ask a social studies or math teacher to work with his or her class to design, pass out, and

tally a student survey. Then he or she can report findings to the SLC, parent meetings, community groups, and the student body. Use the results to plan an improving attendance campaign.

Structure the school to promote parent-teacher contacts. Effective, productive, personal communication between parents and teachers is critical to student achievement. Many middle and high schools have advisory systems, so that parents know someone who knows their child. Elementary schools can go to vertical grouping, where each family is assigned to a school-based "family" in the school.

Make sure teachers have time in the school day to call or meet with families. Set up a day each month or quarter when families can have lunch with their children then visit the classrooms. If you are an elementary school, hold class dinner meetings each year. Start with dinner and activities for children, then visit the classroom and talk about what students will learn. If you are a middle or high school, organize dinner meetings or coffees for families with advisors, interdisciplinary teams, or home room teachers.

Develop a family-school compact. These are required in Title I schools, and they can be a useful way to start a conversation about supporting students' learning. Parent-teacher conferences and other meetings can refer to the compact, with each party discussing progress. The family center can develop resources for families, such as TV viewing guides, to help them with their agreement. See the Family-School Compact Tip Sheet in Appendix D.

Try different ways to communicate. Sending written notices home with children is not the best way to reach families. Mail out postcards. Put up posters in stores, businesses and community meeting places - in English, Spanish and other languages of your community. Set up a telephone tree. Ask a local business to donate a hot-line system, so parents can call and get

messages about what is going on at school. Collaborate with local churches and religious organizations to get information to families.

Engage the entire school staff. While parents and teachers should have a strong working relationship, support staff are important, too. Many people work in schools rather than businesses because they love children. Custodians, security guards, bus drivers, lunch room workers, school secretaries and clerks, set the tone for the school. The SLC should make sure they are informed about SLC meetings, understand the school improvement plan, look at student work, learn about the Core Curriculum Standards, and know what students are learning in class. Put them on SLC committees, too.

As you go, draw in community partners. Map your school attendance area. What businesses and stores serve the area? Are there any hospitals, clinics or other health programs? Where are the churches? Is there a public library? A college, university, or education program? What neighborhood groups are active? A team from Northwestern University mapped one school zone in Chicago and found almost 200 different groups and organizations. In addition to stores, churches and clinics, they found choral groups, a drama club, sports teams, family day care providers, a sorority, and a quilting club. Most were interested in working with students but did not know what to do or how to start.

Approach natural partners. If your school has a program on science or health, approach a hospital or university. If you want more students to plan for higher education, team up with a community college. If you want to set up an after-school program, contact the local YMCA or other youth programs, sports teams, choral groups, artists' clubs and recreation centers. If you want to give students some community service experience, contact local churches and religious

organizations. If you want to offer assistance to families, contact social service organizations and agencies. They may be looking for a place to "co-locate" their services.

Who is going to do this? Again, the district office is in a good position to help with organizational, administrative and logistical supports. The suggestions made here require a lot of work, strong leadership and delegation of key tasks. By working closely with the district office, and if district personnel are on-board with making community and parent partnerships a priority, the load can be substantially lifted off of the shoulders of educators. Support from the principal is also key. The principal must be an advocate for parent and community programming with the district and state, must express constant support for partnership with families, by speaking out about what partnership means, and must actively and creatively seek out the human and financial resources to help it grow.

Here is some advice from successful principals:

- Set clear expectations for teachers, administrators, and all support staff. Insist that calls from families are answered the day they come in. Expect teachers to contact all their students' families, and lead with positive news, at least once a month. Make sure that parent liaisons are not pulled off the job to pinch-hit for other staff.
- Model how to be open to families. Post open door office hours. Greet families as they drop off and pick up their children. Make some home visits. Have breakfast with parents once a month. When families raise an issue, like racism or school safety, respond quickly.
- Give teachers and other staff the time and support to build relationships with families. Set aside planning time in the schedule so that teachers can meet with families. Make more telephones available so that staff and families can stay in touch. Ask the family support team to identify parents' strengths and match them with teachers who need help in the

classroom. Ask teachers what professional development would be helpful in working with families, and offer it.

- Involve families in planning programs for parents and families - and in resolving problems at the school. Ask local groups to help sponsor activities like dialogs and study circles to build relationships between staff and community members. Make sure that parents sit on every SLC committee. Ask the parent organization to survey parents for their ideas about how to handle issues that come up.

The best coping strategy is to ask for help. Your school can become a center of community life, family support, and high achievement, but not without the active involvement of the entire school community.

Supports from the state and other sources: The Abbott regulations make provisions for important family supports for schools. Every elementary school must have a Family Support Team that encourages parent involvement in the school and in students' learning. This Team is supposed to assist the school and support parents to be involved, by:

- Training parents for volunteer roles
- Intervening to resolve behavioral, nutritional, attendance and other issues
- Receiving teacher referrals of students who are not making progress
- Making referrals to appropriate health and human services agencies, to get help for students and their families as needed.

Preschool programs are required to have family workers who do many of these same tasks. Middle and high schools must have a community services coordinator to identify student need and arrange for community-based providers to furnish essential health and social services.

These provisions for family support teams and family workers serve an important

function. Family workers are critical links between families and school staff, when the latter may not live in the area or be familiar with the community. They also can pull in valuable resources for families - connections to social services, information about job opportunities, and access to city policy-makers. In many urban areas, family resource centers also develop political and organizing skills, by helping families register to vote, organizing tenant unions, brokering funding for community services from local grant makers, and creating community development plans.

Federal laws and programs: Several federal programs require parent involvement, as well as provide funding to engage parents in the program. The first two programs are aimed at vulnerable students, those from low-income families and with disabilities. Not only do they require that parents be involved in developing the program, but they also provide key protections for parents and children.

- The federal Title I program is directed to schools with high numbers of low-income children. In most schools, the funds are used to improve instruction in basic skills, such as reading and math. All students in the school must be taught to meet the same high standards set by the state. In New Jersey, that means the Core Curriculum Standards. Each Title I school must have a parent involvement policy, developed with parents. The policy spells out how parents will be partners in developing the school's plan to use Title I funds, and how they will help review the program to make sure it is working. So, if your school is a recipient of Title I funding, you may already have the groundwork in place for a strong parent and community partnership. This jump start, combined with attention to meaningfully engaging parents and others in the school

improvement process in ways described here could lead to much improved parent and community relations and ultimately, to improved outcomes for kids.

- The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) requires public schools to educate students with disabilities. Under IDEA, children who receive special education and support services must learn what the other children are learning, and meet the same high standards set by the state. Each child served by IDEA must have an Individual Education Plan (IEP) developed by teachers and the child's parents. Parents must approve the IEP, be present for the IEP meetings, and agree to any changes in the IEP. Parents also have the right to see their children's school records.

- The Perkins Act and the School-to-Work Opportunities Act provide funds for vocational education. Districts that get funding from these programs must blend academic and vocational education so that all students get strong academic content. Parents, students, teachers and community members must have a say in how the programs are designed and support all students who need extra help. These funds can be used to help students and teachers study their community and identify community needs. Then schools can use this information to develop community development programs.

- The Family Education Rights and Privacy Act requires that schools must let parents see their children's school records. It also restricts who else can look at and use those records. The school must inform parents about all records it keeps on their child,

allow parents to see those records, explain what is in the records, and give parents a copy of the records, if requested.

- The Freedom of Information Act says that information collected with public funds must be available to the public. That means parents are entitled to see school policies and decisions, school-wide student achievement data and other information (such as suspension rates, attendance, discipline actions). They also can see state and school standards, and school plans for state and federal programs.

- The First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution gives parents the right to free speech. This means they can speak, pass out materials, form a group with others, peacefully demonstrate, and ask for change. The school cannot punish parents or their children for doing any of these things.

WHAT DO VOICES FROM THE FIELD TELL US ABOUT BEST PRACTICES?

In this section, we will take a closer look at specific practices that schools have used to go beyond the coping strategies just discussed. *Urgent Message: Families Crucial to School Reform,* a 1997 report from a national summit conference, sets high standards for engaging families in improving their children's schools. These standards are based on actual practice in schools that have dramatically improved student achievement:

<u>All parents should be able to</u>:

- Take part in creating a vision for the school that sets high expectations for all students

- Help develop a system to measure and report on student progress B and to hold the school and district accountable for results
- Be involved in monitoring and analyzing data on student achievement
- Be part of decisions that affect their child's ability to learn---how will resources be used, what are the learning objectives, what teaching strategies will reach all children?
- Understand what their children should be learning -- and ask good questions about whether they have learned it
- Know what good teaching practice looks like
- Provide support for their children's learning at home and set high expectations for their children's future
- Understand their children's rights to a high quality education, and exercise their own rights to make sure their children get it
- Know how to find and use outside help if their children are not getting a good education

What did schools that have successfully engaged parents and community members in improving student achievement actually do? What steps did they take to get there? The information that follows is drawn from case studies, articles and interviews with a wide variety of schools that serve low-income children. (See tip sheet in Appendix E, "Engaging Families in Schools - What Works?")

As part of the school improvement plan, develop a vision for what the school is all about -- and then help the whole school community become invested in it. Even if the school already has a mission statement, perhaps it is time to revisit it, drawing in teachers, families,

students, school staff, and community members. Ask: What is our vision of education for children? What kind of relationship do we want to have with families and the community? Where is this school going? What are our goals? What do we have to offer that is unique? Overall, this statement should answer one key question: Why should families send their children to this school?

Post the vision throughout the school. Put it on a signboard outside. Send a press release about the vision and who was involved in developing it to the local paper. Put it on all materials about the school - the school handbook, newsletter, information sheets, and folders. Put it at the top of the SLC minutes. And do not hesitate to revise it if you need to. It is not the Ten Commandments, written in stone. The vision should be a living document, to which the school community regularly re-dedicates itself.

Let the community see what students do in school. Parents, family members, neighbors, community groups, anyone who is interested, should be able to learn about what happens in class. Instead of back-to-school nights, some schools set up half-day visits to observe classrooms. At Conway Middle School in Louisville, Kentucky, parents and community volunteers help teachers assess portfolios of student work. The El Paso school district sets up regular displays of student work at schools and all over the community - at libraries, shopping malls, community colleges, office buildings, and the school district offices. The exhibits focus on one subject at a time, explaining the standards and showing scoring guides for quality work at different grade levels.

Exhibit student work in ways that help parents, students and teachers understand the standards. What does proficient level work look like - across all the subjects? What is a scoring guide, and how can it help you assess the quality of a project? What does high-level 4th grade

writing look like? What about 8th grade science? What about 11th grade math? What kind of questions are asked on New Jersey's state proficiency test - and what are examples of high-scoring answers?

Explore options for the whole-school reform (WSR) program. *If your school chooses to adopt a WSR model,* before selecting the program, SLC members, parents, students, interested community members as well as teachers and administrators should get an advance look. Are there schools in the district (or in a nearby district) that have adopted the program you are considering? Arrange for a team (or teams) to visit the schools. Observe classrooms. Ask questions: How has this program improved student achievement? What do teachers think of the program? Do the students like it? Has it improved teaching -- and in what ways? How has it changed the school?

Once your school has chosen its WSR program, give parents and community members opportunities to observe. Make a videotape of a classroom that is using the program and show it to the parent group, and anyone else who is interested but cannot come to school during the day. Take a few months to make the whole school community familiar with the program. Display student work and show the new ways that students are learning. Have discussions about how WSR classrooms compare to the schools they went to. How are they different? What are the reasons for the changes? Does it seem like an improvement? Do students have to work harder and think more?

Monitor and report on student achievement regularly. Consider having an annual "state of the school" meeting and report. The SLC should have a standing committee to analyze data on student progress and figure out ways to present the information to parents, family members, and people from the community. Data should be broken down by grade level, gender, race/ethnicity

and income. Are there achievement gaps between certain groups of students, such as boys and girls, white students and students of color, low-income and middle-income students? How does the SLC plan to address them?

All schools, but especially middle and high schools, should also monitor the composition of different programs in the school. Does the school have honors, gifted, Advanced Placement, and other high-level programs? How do those students get selected? Are they a cross-section of all students? Are some groups over/under represented? What about special education and remedial programs? Do students move up and out of low-level programs -- or do they get stuck there? How might these programs contribute to the achievement gap? Parents and students should get complete information about their options, and what these options mean for the student's future.

Every aspect of the school improvement plan and WSR model, if applicable, should be based on this data. The SLC should report regularly on student progress to the school community. Consider putting a regular feature in the school newsletter about how students are performing. Some schools post data on a "How Are We Doing?" bulletin board in the front lobby. New Jersey publishes school report cards each year, and they are available on the Department of Education's website. When they come out, meet with parents and explain what the report cards cover and how to read it.

Families should also understand how students will be assessed. What do the tests cover? How are they scored? What will the results tell us about what students are really learning? During testing season in Kansas City, Kansas, schools have evening workshops about the state test, organized by grade level. During the day, students have taken sample tests, for practice. After dinner, the principal shares last year's student performance data - good and bad. Then

parents and other family members get to “take the test.” Next, they talk about the questions. What were tests like when they were in school? How is this test different? What are student expected to know and do? Teachers show student responses to some of the questions, and parents critique them, using the same scoring guide that professional raters use. Then they look at their own student’s answers.

Build a Learning Community. Professional development should include teachers, staff and families. This sends an important message: At this school everyone is learning all the time. At Ysleta Elementary School in Texas, families sit on grade-level standards teams that are working to make the state and district standards come alive in the classroom. Teachers do the curriculum planning, while parents ask questions. “What does that standard mean? Put it in different words. If you can’t explain it to us, how will our children understand it?” “How does this piece of student work meet that standard?” “What do you mean by a ‘well-organized’ essay - break that down for us.”

Everyone wants - and needs - to know what good teaching looks like. At McCoy elementary school in Kansas City, Missouri, Mexican families asked how reading is taught in the U.S. The school was starting a new Balanced Literacy program, and parents wanted to know all about “read-alouds,” the classroom library, and word walls. “Why are you moving the furniture around?” they asked. “What is that carpet for?” They began visiting the classrooms, sitting in when reading coaches worked with teachers, and then doing many of the same things at home with their children. A side benefit -- many parents said their English skills improved.

When other schools learned that McCoy’s reading scores had gone up, they began bringing teams of teachers, parents, and staff over to see what was going on. The McCoy Successful Schools Team designed a walk-through tour. After a breakfast session where visitors

learned about the program, they broke up into pairs or trios and visited classrooms. Family center staff, parent leaders and other school staff, all well versed in promoting literacy, served as guides. The League of Latin American Citizens (LULAC) organized groups of Latino families to tour the school too. The program is now spreading to other elementary schools in the district.

"Walk-through" protocols for the principal, teachers, students, families and SLC members are a useful tool. A protocol is a process with specific steps and questions to ask. Schools working with the Institute for Learning in Pittsburgh, a national school reform group, use the "learning walk" as a tool for quality control. Principals visit classrooms, and ask teachers and students a series of questions about the quality of what they are teaching and learning. Teachers pay visits to other classrooms, study what is going on, and get ideas how to improve their own teaching. Then they hold group discussions about what they observed. Parents can use a protocol, too, to learn what to look for in their child's school and classroom. See Tips for Visiting Schools in Appendix F. Also see the Institute's web site: www.instituteforlearning.org/pol/at.html

Help students and families through transitions. The passage into school and from one level of schooling to the next is a critical time for students and families. Research shows that transition programs help students adjust more easily to the new setting, and that leads to better attendance, and higher achievement. To support students fully, the whole family should be prepared to make the change. There are three key elements of a successful transition:

1. Feeling (and being) prepared to do what is required at the next level
2. Knowing the principal, teachers and some of the older students who will be there
3. Being familiar with the physical surroundings and feeling welcome and

comfortable

The transitions into kindergarten and first grade are critical for helping a student make a good adjustment to school. If students are ready for first grade work, long-term research shows, they do better throughout their entire career in school. Many states and districts now have early childhood programs like those required by Abbott. The most effective programs are those with frequent home visits. In addition to working with families to develop children=s learning skills, home visitors discover any developmental delays or problems. Then families can get the services they need so their children will catch up. In the Parents As Teachers program, for example, more than half the children with developmental delays overcame them by age three.

A solid transition program is composed of several pieces.

- ***Before the new school year:*** Home visits, tours of the school, questionnaires, and meet-the-teachers events are useful spring and summer activities. Screening and diagnostic testing identify students who need extra help, and steer them to summer learning programs. Central Park East School in Harlem asks prospective students and parents to spend 2-3 days at the school before enrolling.
- ***The first month of school:*** Orientations, class meetings, goal-setting conferences, opportunities to volunteer in the classroom, and classroom visits are common ingredients. Some schools have a visitors' day each week for the first month.
- ***Second month of school:*** This period sets the schedule and tone for the rest of the year. Frequent personal communication, exchanges of written comments around student work, and focus groups or dialogues to surface and discuss issues and concerns.

Many elementary schools hold transition activities from one grade to the next each year.

In schools that are organized vertically, students know who their teachers will be as soon as they are assigned to a team or "family." These teachers collaborate with each other to make sure each grade is prepared for the next. In the spring, teachers begin visiting their prospective students and talking about the next year. Families get to know all the teachers in the team as they become involved in the school. In elementary schools organized across grade levels, students can visit the teacher's classroom where they will spend the next year. See "Award-Winning Kindergarten Transition Program" in Appendix G for more ideas.

The transition to middle and high school can be traumatic for many students (and their families). Fifth grade students in Shelby County (KY) helped to design a transition program to middle school, based on what they felt would help make the school "less scary." First, they wanted the middle school principal and teachers to visit their elementary school and talk to them and their parents. Then they wanted to spend a couple of days at the middle school, including riding the bus, with older student "buddies" to guide them. Learning where everything is, how to work the lockers, and how to get around was a high priority. Third, they asked that the middle school offer tours for their parents, so they would know their way around, too.

The Met High School in Providence (RI) enrolls not just the student, but the whole family. All families visit in the spring to sign their students up for the school. After observing classes and talking with students and teachers, parents, the student, and school staff sign a contract that sets out what is expected for all three parties. Each student has a "student support team" that meets regularly to make sure the student succeeds. The typical team is composed of the parents, a counselor or teacher, the student's advisor, and a mentor from the community. This team is the primary audience for the students' exhibitions of their work twice a year.

Although the basic principles of effective programs to engage families are fairly universal, the forms they may take at any one school are infinite. There is no one-size-fits-all

program any more than there is a typical child or one best school. What is important is to listen to the whole school community. What are your concerns? What cultures are represented? How do families want to be engaged? What would help teachers work more closely with families? What do students say (even the youngest ones have a lot to contribute) about what would make them feel happier and more connected to school? Once you have the information to answer these questions, you will be ready to design a program that will work in your setting.

For additional sources of information on parent, family and community involvement, see Appendix I.

References

Bamber, Christina, Nancy Berla, and Anne T. Henderson. *Learning from Others: Good Programs and Successful Campaigns.* Center for Law and Education, Washington, DC, 1994.

Center for Law and Education, *Urgent Message for Parents.* Washington, DC, 1999.

David, Jane, "School-Based Decision Making: Linking Decisions to Learning." Prichard Committee for Academic Excellence, Lexington, KY, 1994.

Henderson, Anne T. ed., *Parents Are Powerful*. Center for Law and Education. 1996.

Henderson, Anne T. and Nancy Berla. *A New Generation of Evidence: The Family is Critical to Student Achievement.* Center for Law and Education, Washington DC, 1994.

Lewis, Anne C. and Anne T. Henderson, *Urgent Message: Families Crucial to School Reform*. Center for Law and Education, Washington, DC, 1997.

Tellin' Stories Action Research Group, *Between Families and Schools: Creating Meaningful Relationships.* Tellin' Stories Project, Washington, DC, 2000.

Walker, Elaine M. "Decentralization and participatory decision-making: Implementing school-based management in the Abbott Districts" Seton Hall University. Research Brief. Volume 1: No. 1, December 2000.

Appendix A: Involving Parents in Powerful Ways

School has changed. Now there are new, high standards, and high-stakes tests students must pass. Schools are under great pressure to improve achievement, and so are parents and students. The economy has changed. Unless students learn the skills and content they need to know, and take the right courses in school, their prospects are not bright. Has parent involvement at your school changed, too? Does it focus on helping parents make sure their children do well in school?

Support families to be involved in these ways:

1. Establish a working relationship with their child's teacher. In middle and high school, parents should meet all the teachers and try to work closely with one, or with a counselor or advisor. Make sure that teacher knows who they are and who their child is.

2. Express high expectations for their child (I want him/her to do well, go to college, etc.) and work with the school to make that happen. Make sure the teacher and the school share those expectations and are willing to work with them.

3. Make sure their children are in a high-quality program and learning to high standards. Many schools have elaborate tracking systems. Parents may not be aware that their children are in a lower-level program. If their children are behind or need extra help, make sure it's enough so that they can catch up and move into a higher-level program.

4. Understand what the standards say their children should be learning. Be able to look at their child's work in light of those standards. Learn about how the school teaches those skills and content. Visit the classrooms, look at the student work, compare it to the standards.

5. Know what's going on at school, and how well the students in that school are doing. Understand school report cards published by the state or district

6. Know the admission requirements of the college or post-secondary program their child wants to attend. Make sure their child is in the right program to meet those requirements and is taking all the classes needed. The beginning of middle school is not too early to start checking.

7. Talk to their children about school every day. What are they learning? Why is it important? How do they think they can use it in life? How can they tell if they are doing good work?

8. Help their children think about and plan for the future. What are their interests? What do they want to be learning? What school would they like to attend?

9. Learn about what the school is doing to make sure all children are succeeding. Does it have an improvement plan? What are the goals? How do we know if they're making progress? What will happen if they aren't making enough progress?

10. Talk to other parents. Get to know the parents of their children's friends. Share your questions and concerns. If parents feel there are problems at the school, raise them at the parent group. Organize a group to discuss this with the principal.

Appendix B: How Family-friendly Is Your School?

Lots of research tells us that family-friendly schools are better for students. Teachers expect more of students when they know their families. Students feel more comfortable in school. Families are more involved. All this adds up to improved student achievement.

Does your school welcome families? Does it help them understand what their children are learning? Do families and school staff know each other and work together to help students? Does the school support families and help build a healthy community?

It's not hard to tell. Visit your child's school and take a look around. Look at this check list for some ideas about what to look for and ask about. Ask other parents and school staff to do the same. Then talk about what you see. There are many simple things a school can do to open itself up to families. Working together, you can make a big difference for students.

Is Your School Welcoming?

- ✓ Is the school entrance clear and inviting?
- ✓ Are there parking spaces marked for parents and other visitors?
- ✓ Are there signs in both English and Spanish to help you find your way around?
- ✓ Is the office staff friendly and helpful? Do they answer the phone nicely?
- ✓ Is the waiting area comfortable?
- ✓ Do you notice anything else?

_____

Does Your School Help Families Understand What Children Are Learning?

- ✓ Is there a clearly posted mission statement that tells you what the school is all about?
- ✓ Are there displays of student work in the lobby, the hallways, and the classrooms? Do they show the standards for what students should be learning?
- ✓ May parents visit and observe their child's classroom? At almost any time?
- ✓ Is there clear and written information for parents about what children are learning and how they are doing?
- ✓ Are parents invited to school staff meetings and training sessions?
- ✓ Do you notice anything else?

_____

Do Families, Teachers and Other Staff Know Each Other and Work Together?

- ✓ Is it easy to meet with your child's teachers? The principal? The counselors?
- ✓ Is there a family center for parents to meet, get information, and learn about the school? Is it furnished and comfortable? Does it lend toys, books and learning materials?
- ✓ Is there a volunteer program? Does it offer interesting things to do at home and at school?
- ✓ Does the school have an active parent organization? Is the whole family welcome to meetings? Do the teachers attend, too? Are the meetings fun and interesting?
- ✓ Are there committees or other groups where parents and teachers work together to improve the school?
- ✓ Notice anything else? _____

Does Your School Support Families and the Community?

- ✓ Does the school ask families about what's important to them and the local community?
- ✓ Is the school building open during the evening and on weekends? Can parents and neighbors use the library, playground, computers, and other equipment? Do local groups have meetings and activities at the school?
- ✓ Does the school or the parent group organize events for parents and community members to get to know each other?
- ✓ Does the school offer adult education programs?
- ✓ Can families find out where to get help, such as health services, rent assistance, job training, and information about immigration rules, at the school? Does the school have voter registration forms?
- ✓ Notice anything else? _____

Comments:

Appendix C: Setting up a Family Center

In most public schools, parents and families can meet together, but only a few schools give parents a place they can call their own. An empty classroom, the end of a hallway, a corner of the library, a storeroom, even a large closet, can become a "Family Center." This is a place that provides parents a comfortable, year-round place to meet, plan, exchange information, and find out about helpful resources.

What does a Family Center say about a school?
"Families are always welcome – they belong here. Parents are no longer just visitors. They are important partners – members of the team that makes sure all our children are learning."

What does it take to set up a center?

1) Space: A center can be either in the school building or nearby. Some centers are based outside the school, in a church, mobile classroom, library, clinic, storefront, or apartment building. The best place is in the school, where the action is -- near the front office.

2) Furnishings: Offer adult-size tables and chairs, a comfortable second-hand sofa, a desk with a computer that has access to the Internet, a bookcase filled with parenting materials and books to borrow, a supply of toys and games. Add a coffee pot, a telephone, and a bulletin board. Some centers have a refrigerator, a TV and VCR, and sewing machines.

3) Staff: Make sure a live body is always there, either paid or volunteer. If the center is supported with Title I funds, the program coordinator may use the center as an office. If the school has parent liaisons, they can be based at the center.

4) Connections: This is key. The more community groups and agencies know about the center, the better it will serve families and the school. They can donate items and put out information, plus they can offer services at the center. Many agencies are looking for places in the community to reach families.

5) An Open Door: Put up signs to direct people from the office to the center. Brew coffee and pop corn -- the smell will draw people there. Set up a clothing closet. Ask local businesses to donate school supplies and little gifts. Welcome everyone. Tip: make sure a small group of "insiders" does not dominate.

What goes on at the Family Center? The center can host dozens of activities and services, not just for parents, but also for grandparents, students, preschoolers, teachers and community members. It can display information, offer classes, store supplies, stock a gift shop, lend books and toys, and be the school community's meeting place. Ask families what they would like in the center, then ask them to help get it.

Here is a list of things happening at family centers around the country:

- School volunteers check in, and leave their children to be cared for
- The school council meets here
- Home visitors make phone calls and compare notes
- Parents meet with the school counselor
- Parent and student support groups meet
- Parents plan events to support and honor teachers
- Families attend classes and study English
- Parents make toys and share potluck meals
- Families borrow books, tapes and toys
- Parents bring "prescriptions" from teachers for learning activities to help their children
- Families get referrals to medical care or social services
- Students cash in school "money" they've earned to get supplies and gifts
- Families can search for housing or a job
- Parent liaisons meet with families to explain a report card or translate information
- Students get help with homework.

What makes a parent center successful?

- Every family in the school knows about it
- The school principal supports it
- Every family feels welcome
- Teachers and other school staff think of the center as a resource
- It's open every day, during and after school
- Someone is always there, and the door is never locked (except when the school is closed)
- Volunteers and staff who run the center listen and respond to families

What happens when a school opens a family center?
Students feel safe. Parents spend more time in the school. The school becomes a resource for the whole community. Teachers get to know families better. Social services and local groups have a new base to serve the community. Families get to know each other and form support groups. The core of volunteers expands. The school develops a better reputation in the community. Students like coming to school more....

Appendix D: Family-School Compact Tip Sheet

Family-school compacts encourage stronger family-school partnership. They also make clear that teachers, parents and students share the responsibility of making sure that each student learns what he or she needs to know. Title I, the largest federal elementary and secondary program, requires that schools develop such compacts with families of Title I children. Teachers and parents both find compacts to be helpful in making clear what each should do to encourage students. Students appreciate being treated like a responsible person. Here are some suggestions for developing a useful compact at your school:

▶ Three-way compacts seem to be the most effective: parents/family, teacher, and student. Each person in the learning triangle knows what's expected. Plan to develop one for every student in the school (not just Title I students). Make sure it's signed by all three parties.

▶ Give parents, students, and school staff opportunities to say what they want the compact to cover. Ask each group to list what it wants the OTHERS to do. Then ask them to list what should be expected of THEM. (A common pitfall is that teachers often want the compact to list rules that apply only to parents and students). Make it clear that rules apply equally to everyone.

▶ Focus the compact on common concerns that have come up in the discussions. For each area (e.g. homework, communication, rules of behavior), list what each group can do. For example, take homework. What does the school expect of students (write down assignments, do my homework every day, and turn it in when it's due), parents (look at the assignments, talk to my child about them, and make sure he/she does the work and hands it in), and teachers (assign homework that is relevant and interesting, make sure students understand the assignment and what they'll learn from doing it, and grade it promptly).

▶ Draw up a first draft, then ask for comments. Then revise it based on how parents, teachers and students react. Here are some things to watch out for:

- Keep the statements/expectations about equal in length for each group. Don't have a list of 20 obligations for parents and only five for teachers.
- Make the lists short. About ten items for each group is a reasonable length.
- Be careful about patronizing parents. A typical pitfall: "I will make sure my child is clean and rested." (Parents might react, "why would they even think I wouldn't do that?")
- Offer guidelines rather than principles. For example, rather than "I will monitor television viewing," try, "I will keep weekday TV watching to one hour a day." Then the school could agree to send home notices of good programs that will be broadcast.

▶ Include information that will help parents and students understand how to do what's expected. Or follow up with some tip sheets. For example, instead of "I will talk to my child about school daily," try, "when I talk to my child each day about school, I'll ask questions that can't be answered just with yes or no. Through the week, I'll try to cover what they're learning, what they like about school, any problems they're having, and what's going on with their friends."

▶ Revisit the compact every year. Review its effectiveness with families, students, teachers and other school staff. Ask each group how they think it could be better.

Appendix E: Engaging Families in Education – What Works

Do More of This...	And Less of This....
Creating one-on-one conversations between teachers and parents	Holding school-wide events
Small meetings in classrooms, community centers, and homes	Big meetings in the auditorium or all-purpose room
Contacting families regularly via home visits, phone calls and notes	Calling only when students misbehave or are in trouble
Emphasizing the positive	Pointing out what's wrong
Learning how to look at student work	Offering parenting workshops
Sharing data on progress of all students in school	Talking only about each student's test scores
Student-lead conferences and learning demonstrations, presenting portfolios and student work	Parent-teacher conferences, focused on report cards
Visiting other schools and districts to look at good practice	Asking families to hold fund-raisers to purchase sports equipment
Holding rap sessions with students, teachers and families to discuss important issues	Running Robert-Rules-of-Order business meetings
Displays of student work, with scoring guides to look at levels of performance	Teacher-made bulletin boards, with themes like "Spring is Coming"

Appendix F: Tips for Visiting School

Why Visit Your Child's School? When parents visit the school, teachers know that you expect them to do a good job. And children know that you care about them. If it's a public school, parents have a right to go there. Teachers expect more of children whose parents come to the school.

What To Do on Your First Visit

1. Call the office to say you're coming. Be sure to pick a day that is convenient. If the students are being tested or out on field trips, you won't see much. Explain that it will be easier to talk with your child about school if you have been there.

2. Check in at the office. Introduce yourself. Say you want to visit your child's classes and look around the school. Some schools may ask a student to be your tour guide.

3. See what students are doing. Are they using lots of learning tools? Are they working together on projects? Do they look interested in what they're doing? Is there student work posted on the walls?

4. Observe the teacher. Does the teacher push students to be creative and think for themselves? Does the teacher ask a lot of questions? Does the teacher give students enough time to answer? Do all students take part in class discussions? If the students are using computers, are they looking for information, or just writing?

5. Look for three key things:
- Are students finding out things on their own? Are they using different sources, like experiments, newspapers, the Internet, interviews, charts and graphs?
- Do students do research to test their ideas and discover facts?
- Are students solving real-world problems and or just doing drill-work?

6. Talk to students. Ask what they're doing. Then ask what they're learning by doing this. Ask why they think it's important. Students should be able to explain what they're studying and why.

7. Reflect on your visit. What did you learn? What more would you like to know? Did you feel welcome? Talk to other parents about your visit and encourage them to visit. Suggest that SMT members observe classes, too.

Appendix G: Award-winning Kindergarten Transition Program

A Kindergarten teacher designed this program based on a summer institute called "The Home-School Connection." Her goal was to build a positive, ongoing partnership with families and give them opportunities to become fully involved in their children's education.

August:

- Contact families prior to school, to introduce myself and invite them to an ice cream social (face-to-face if possible)
- Send letter home inviting families and children to the social, enclose questionnaire (tell me about yourself and your child)
- Hold the ice cream social -- have "icebreakers" to help families get acquainted, select class communicator
- Send introduction letter to child, with his/her name tag
- Contact parents and children the night before school begins to answer questions and concerns

September

- Send home weekly class news – same bright color all year, with space at end for comments
- Class communicator calls families to invite them to kindergarten orientation
- Send letter home inviting families to the orientation
- Hold the orientation – Walk through a typical day, explain basics, sign up for goals-setting conferences, and ride the school buses home.
- Send letter about orientation to families who could not attend
- Send letter inviting parents to school open house
- Set up "parent dialogue groups" as part of the school improvement team initiative

October

- Hold parent dialogue groups
- Hold goals conferences, direct families to services if needed
- Invite parents in throughout year to observe and take part in class
- Set up workshops, based on dialogue group results
- Encourage school-wide family nights
- Hold classroom family nights

Appendix H: Building blocks of a successful program

Basic Principle	Examples
Establish meaningful, personal contact with *every* family in the school.	Back-to-school week (orientation meeting, class visits, lunch with students, curriculum nights, breakfast with principal) Class meetings each semester Tours of school for new families Home visits Family-school compact for family involvement Flexible meeting times Transportation, food and childcare for all events
Communicate at least once a month with each family about how their children are progressing.	Student journals, with space for parent and teacher comments Meetings each quarter to set goals for student's learning and review progress. Folders of student work go home on Friday Good news calls, notes Family conferences offered each grading period and required twice a year.
Hire and train the family support team	Reach out to families (calls, home visits, community meetings) Recruit volunteers and community partners Set up and staff the family center Arrange transportation and childcare Advise the principal, SMT, and parent group president Help families connect to social services, translate, meet with teachers
Set up a family center in the school – a safe place for parents and family to gather, talk and learn.	Comfortable seating, coffee, room to meet in groups Private space for one-on-one meetings Information materials for families Parent access to computer, Internet, copier, telephone, VCR (for educational purposes) Open all day Parent/adult education Information about social services, child care, medical referrals, housing, employment, immigration, etc.
Share and display student work to explain the standards, how children are being taught, and how well students are reaching the standards. Explain how the WSR program is changing what students do in school.	Current projects posted on classroom walls. Students help design the exhibits. Exhibits of student work in hallways show what students are doing in different subjects. Scoring guides explain the standards and what students were trying to do. Curriculum nights highlight the main subjects. Students exhibit their portfolios and explain their best work twice a year. Families, teachers, classmates attend. Parents and family members help teachers assess portfolios.

Share student achievement data (test scores, results of performance assessments) with families. Encourage collaboration to improve the results. Explain how WSR program works and discuss its impact on student performance.	Develop a school profile (Title I requires this) and share it with families and the community. Make sure it is family-friendly. Develop a plan to improve achievement. Share this, too. The SMT holds a "state of the school" meeting at the beginning and end of the year. Explain the data, the WSR program, and the plan for improvement. Post data on student achievement all year. Explain how it relates to the profile and the plan. Present some achievement data at every meeting. This includes family-teacher conferences. Help families and students understand how to read and interpret the data. Enter the data on the school computer system, so that every teacher has access to it.

Appendix I: Web Sites with Resources on Parent, Family and Community Involvement

General Information about Parent/Family Involvement

Connect for Kids
www.connectforkids.org A project of the Benton foundation to help people act as citizens, not just as consumers. Offers a public space on the Internet for adults - parents, grandparents, educators, policymakers and others - who want to make their communities for kids.

Disney Learning Partnership
www.disneylearning.org This site has some good stuff for parents, but is even better for teachers. It posts two parent handbooks, *Parents Are Powerful* and *Urgent Message for Parents*, in pdf format.

The Family Education Company
www.familyeducation.com This site is dedicated to helping parents help their children learn. In 1996, the company launched this education-based web site for parents. The company is working with partners such as the National PTA and the AASA to build the Family Education Network, a national network of web sites that connect parents, schools and communities.

Family Friendly Schools
www.familyfriendlyschools.org This site is committed to helping schools establish a culture that promotes shared responsibility for the academic achievement of all students.

Institute for Responsive Education
www.resp-ed.org
IRE promotes educational restructuring through the development of family-school-community partnerships. It encourages equal collaboration among schools, families, and communities in providing improved and more equitable education for all children. (Good tip sheets for parents, publications, links)

MiddleWeb
www.middleweb.com
This site is run with funding from the Edna McConnell Clark Foundation and is packed with useful information, news updates, links to other sites, and a list serve feature, all about middle grades reform. There is a separate section on parent-community involvement.

National Coalition for Parent Involvement in Education
www.ncpie.org This useful site offers links to many education organizations, with information about the parent involvement resources they offer. It also has a guide to developing a parent involvement policy,

Parents for Public Schools
www.parents4publicschools.com
PPS supports and strengthens public schools in communities throughout America. They are committed to restoring and sustaining productive family involvement and advocating community-wide support of public education. (good info on starting an organization, getting involved, plus good links to lots of other sites)

Partners in Learning
www.schoolsuccess.org
This site is a collaboration between People for the American Way and the NAACP. It contains basic tips for parents, such as how to arrange to visit your school, what to do if your child has a poor teacher, and things you can do at home to help your child. The whole kit can be downloaded.

Sites for Parents of Children with Disabilities:

National Information Center for Children and Youth with Disabilities
www.nichcy.org
NICHCY is a clearinghouse funded by the U.S. Department of Education. It provides information to assist families, educators, caregivers, advocates and others in helping children and youth with disabilities participate as fully as possible at home, in school and in the community.

PACER Center, Inc.
FAPE Project
www.fape.org
Excellent information and materials for parents of kids with disabilities. This site is more advocacy-oriented than the NICHCY site.

Sites where Parents Can Get Information about Schools:

GreatSchools,
www.greatschools.net A non-profit organization dedicated to providing the best, most comprehensive information about public schools. Features school profiles for all K-12 public schools in CA and AZ, plus more limited information on schools in the other states, plus tools to help visitors search for and compare schools.

Internet School Report Cards
www.heritage.org/reportcards
The Heritage Foundation offers instant links to state-operated web sites that give information about public school performance. By clicking on their own state on the national map, parents can find out how well students in their children's school are performing on the state's achievement tests, and compare their school to others in the district or state.

Just for Kids (Texas)
www.just4kids.org This site is dedicated to raising academic standards and increasing student achievement in Texas. This organization has three key initiatives to improve public education: data analysis, public information and training.

School Wise Press (California)
www.schoolwisepress.com This California-based site offers information to clarify how schools work and how schools differ, and guides parents as to how they can more fully participate in school life. Although the information is intended for California parents, it applies to other settings.

Sites with Information about Improving Schools:

Annenberg Institute for School Reform
www.annenberginstitute.org This site is an excellent resource on school reform. The Accountability Toolbox includes information about how to host a public forum on accountability, how to use surveys, how to examine student work samples, and more. Although it is not geared specifically to parents, the information is useful for a general audience.

Center for Law and Education
www.cleweb.org The Center carries a catalog of useful school improvement resources, including parent involvement, and is an excellent source of information for advocates on high school reform, special education, and Title I.

Council for Basic Education
www.c-b-e.org In addition to useful materials for educators on school improvement, this site offers a "virtual backpack for parents" that includes "How Does Your School Measure Up?" and "A Guide for Understanding Standards."

Prichard Committee for Academic Excellence
www.prichardcommittee.org An independent, non-partisan organization of Kentucky parents and citizens who mission is to give Kentuckians a voice for vastly improved education. Recommends solutions to problems and informs the public through its publications, including guidebooks on school-based decision making and school law. (KY only, but a good example of what an independent state website could be)

Rethinking Schools
www.rethinkingschools.org A non-profit, independent publisher of educational materials advocating the reform of elementary and secondary education, with a strong emphasis on issues of equity and social justice.

Network of Educators on the Americas (NECA)
www.teachingforchange.org This organization promotes intercultural understanding and offers an excellent catalog of multi-cultural learning materials and children's books.