ISSUE BRIEF

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REACHING OUT TO FAMILIES AND THE COMMUNITY

How Some High-Performing Schools are Engaging Families and Citizens to Support Student Achievement

Students tend to be more successful in school when educators, families, and community members work together to support learning (Barton, 2007; Ferguson, 2008). Family and community involvement have been linked to improved student achievement, higher attendance rates, better social skills, and higher rates of postsecondary education (Fan & Chen, 2001; Harvard Family Research Project, 2007a; Henderson & Mapp, 2002; Jordan, Orozco, & Averett, 2002). This is true of students at all ages and from all backgrounds, regardless of family income level, ethnicity, or cultural heritage (Bouffard & Stephen, 2007; Harvard Family Research Project, 2006).

Family and community involvement can take many forms, but at its core it is about forming partnerships that are focused on providing guidance and support to students. Greater benefits can be realized when these partnerships are intentionally structured and supported and not merely left to happen (Blank, Berg, & Melaville, 2006; Ferguson, 2008; Resto & Alston, 2006). Structural features that have a positive influence on such partnerships include:

- **CREATING A SENSE OF WELCOME THAT TRANSCENDS CONTEXT, CULTURE, AND LANGUAGE** (Auerbach, 2007; Boethel, 2003; Caspe & Lopez, 2006; Ferguson, 2008; Henderson & Mapp, 2002; Resto &

Alston, 2007; Stewart, 2008). This can involve reaching out to diverse populations (Ferguson, 2005; Timmons, 2000).

- **ELIMINATING MISCONCEPTIONS AMONG STAKEHOLDERS** (Abrams & Gibbs, 2000; Anderson & Minke, 2007; Boethel, 2003; Caspe & Lopez, 2006; Ferguson, 2008; Henderson & Mapp, 2002; Quiocho & Daoud, 2006). This includes engaging all stakeholders in a meaningful process characterized by common understandings, shared decision making, and mutual trust (Adams & Christenson, 2000; Ferguson, 2005; Goddard, Tschannen-Moran, & Hoy, 2001).

- **DIRECTING SCHOOL, FAMILY, AND COMMUNITY RESOURCES TO SUPPORT SPECIFICALLY TARGETED AREAS OF NEED** (Caspe & Lopez, 2006; Ferguson, 2008; Zarate, 2007). This includes paying attention to barriers to family and community involvement (e.g., providing school translators, identifying a family-school liaison who actively works to engage parents, offering professional development experiences to families, etc.) (Darling-Hammond & Wood, 2008; Ferguson, 2005; Pate & Andrews, 2006).

- **INCREASING SUPPORT FOR LEARNING IN THE HOME AND COMMUNITY** (Ferguson, 2008; Harvard

Family Research Project, 2007a; Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2005). This includes partnerships that offer support for all aspects of learning across many contexts and recognize that valuable learning also occurs and can be nurtured outside of school hours (Blank, Berg, & Melaville, 2006; Resto & Alston, 2006).

This Issue Brief highlights the ways in which selected high-performing schools incorporate parent and community involvement in their efforts to increase student achievement. [For school selection criteria, see the textbox, "About the Schools Featured in this Issue Brief."] Principals in these schools have structured opportunities for family and community engagement that reflect many of the features identified in the literature as necessary for forming partnerships focused on improving student achievement.

[*Note:* In addition to the individual school initiatives featured in this Issue Brief, there are a number of larger initiatives that are designed to engage families and community members. For examples, see the textbox, "Community and Parental Engagement Initiatives: Emerging Trends."]

Granger High School— Developing Family Partnerships with the Help of Teacher Mentors

Family involvement tends to decrease across the middle and high school levels, yet it remains a strong predictor of adolescents' academic achievement and social outcomes (Bouffard & Stephen, 2007; Harvard Family Research Project, 2007b). Adolescents benefit when adults are involved in their daily lives (Ferguson & Rodriguez, 2005).

Believing strongly that families can have a positive impact on student achievement, Granger High School Principal Richard Esparza set 100 percent parent involvement as a goal—a goal that was

About the Schools Featured in this Issue Brief

In 2007, Karin Chenoweth at the Education Trust released *It's Being Done: Academic Success in Unexpected Schools.* The book features schools across the United States in which historically underserved students are achieving at the highest levels. Chenowith worked in collaboration with the Achievement Alliance and the Harvard Graduate School of Education to establish the following selection criteria for the featured schools:

- A significant population of children living in poverty and/or significant population of children of color
- Proficiency rates above 80 percent, or a very rapid improvement trajectory
- Relatively small gaps in student achievement in comparison with achievement gaps statewide
- Two years' worth of comparable data
- High graduation rates and a high proportion of freshmen who became seniors four years later
- Adequate yearly progress met
- Open enrollment for neighborhood children (e.g., no magnet or charter schools)

Since publication of the book, the Achievement Alliance has continued to identify and document high-achieving schools meeting these criteria (see www.achievementalliance.org). Schools selected for inclusion in this Issue Brief met the above criteria and were featured either in the Chenoweth book or on the Achievement Alliance website. In each case, school leaders cited family and/or community involvement as essential to their success.

Community and Parental Engagement Initiatives: Emerging Trends

In recent years, new initiatives have expanded the concept of family and community involvement. Many of these are focused on both bringing community members and families into schools and bringing students into the community. While it is beyond the scope of this *Issue Brief* to fully describe the numerous initiatives, the following list is offered as a starting place to explore some of the elements found in these emerging approaches. [*Note:* This list is not mutually exclusive; in fact, a number of models incorporate several of the features.]

- **COMMUNITY ORGANIZING.** Community organizing engages parents and community members in struggling schools by intentionally building their capacity to reform schools. Community organizing differs from standard forms of parent involvement by focusing on systemic change and school accountability. Parents and community members exercise their responsibilities as citizens to make changes in schools. Emerging data on student achievement, student attendance, and graduation rates show encouraging results. [For more information, see Lopez, 2003; Mediratta, Shah, McAlister, Fruchter, Mokhtar, & Lockwood, 2008.]

- **COMMUNITY SCHOOLS.** Community schools typically differ from other public schools in that they are generally open most of the time, they are governed by a partnership between the school system and a community agency, and they offer a broad array of health and social services (Dryfoos, Quinn, & Barkin, 2005). Community schools intentionally integrate school and nonschool supports for children, families, and community members at large.* These supports are in conjunction with a strong academic program and extended learning opportunities. Research suggests a positive relationship between community schools and student achievement. [For more information, see Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2008; Blank, Melaville, & Shaw, 2003; Bouffard, Malone, & Deschenes, 2008; Bouffard & Weiss, 2008; Children's Aid Society, 2001; Harkavy & Blank, 2002.]

- **EXTENDED LEARNING TIME.** Afterschool programs extend the learning opportunities for students. One example is Citizens Schools, which partners struggling middle school students with its staff and other outside organizations. The additional time is used to provide students with math support and hands-on elective activities. Initial program evaluations show gains in student achievement. [For more information, see Bernier, 2008.]

* The Harvard Family Research Project has developed a framework, Complementary Learning, for integrating school and nonschool supports (for more information, visit the website at http://www.hfrp.org/complementary-learning).

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achieved. To achieve this goal, he and his staff created a process for connecting families to their children's education. The process acknowledged the unique needs of the community.

Granger High School serves a primarily rural population in Washington State with families that make their living as agricultural workers. One third of the 330 students are children of migrant workers. About 82 percent are Hispanic, 6 percent are Native American, and 10 percent are Caucasian. The vast majority of students (84 percent) is eligible for free or reduced price meals.

"I grew up in a similar community," Esparza tells us. "I asked myself, 'How did I make it?' The answer, in large part, was my parents." Esparza used his own experience to reflect on the ways he could build strong partnerships with families. The first thing he did was to identify the barriers to their involvement.

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"Like many high schools, we were unwittingly providing an unwelcoming atmosphere for parents. The few parents or guardians who came to school-family nights were expected to talk to each of their child's teachers, usually for not more than five minutes, while families stood waiting in line within earshot." Esparza notes. "We needed to recreate this system to focus on meaningful communication in a safe environment. At its core, families needed to feel welcome and essential to their children's education. And, they needed to be supported in participating."

Esparza and his staff initiated a system that featured the following elements:

- **TEACHER MENTORS.** School resources were redistributed to enable each teacher to become a mentor to a group of 20 students, whom they championed for four years. For the most part, each teacher has on his or her caseload four to five students who have significant learning and/or behavioral needs. Teacher mentors develop personalized individualized educational plans with each of their students that detail goals, objectives, special activities, and various supports. These plans are discussed with parents and/or guardians. The mentor becomes the liaison between the family and school.

- **BIANNUAL INDIVIDUALIZED PARENT CONFERENCES.** Teacher mentors meet individually with parents for 30 to 60 minutes at least twice annually. The focus of these discussions is on improving student learning and emphasizing the important role that families can play in supporting their child's learning in the home and the community. Sharing high expectations for student learning is a major part of these discussions. To encourage attendance, mentors schedule meetings at convenient times. Sometimes, mentors schedule off-site locations (e.g., in the home) to accommodate families.

- **SEMIMONTHLY PROGRESS REPORTS.** A basic tenet of the approach is to make sure that students do not fail. Every other Friday, student progress reports are sent home to families. Parents are encouraged to monitor these reports. Should there be questions or

concerns, families can contact their child's mentor, or vice versa.

Esparza is convinced that family-school partnerships are partly responsible for the increase in student achievement and graduation rates experienced by the school. "Families wanted to be involved in their child's education. They needed a way to feel welcomed and acknowledged by the school. And they needed specific ways, such as monitoring their child's progress, to provide support in the home. The 100 percent attendance rate of our families at the biannual meetings is a testament to the system." Esparza adds, "As students succeed academically, their behavior improves and morale increases. Success breeds success."

P.S./ M.S. 124, Osmond A. Church School— Partnering with Families Through the Curriculum

School partnerships that successfully connect with families invite involvement and address specific parental needs (Henderson & Mapp, 2002). In the case of P.S./ M.S. 124, a major need of families focused on understanding what their children were learning in school so that they could support them in the home.

As part of a comprehensive school reform initiative in 1999, P.S./ M.S. 124 adopted a formal curriculum approach. "The first thing we did was to look at who our families are and ask how we could provide nonthreatening opportunities for them to become partners in the school's new curriculum," explains Principal Valarie Lewis. "Since many family members do not read or write English, there was a lot of reluctance on their part to become involved."

There are more than 1,200 students enrolled at P.S./M.S. 124, which is located near JFK Airport in Queens, New York. About 40 percent of the students are African American, 33 percent are Asian (mostly of Indian and Pakistani descent), and 23 percent are Hispanic. More than 90 percent of the students qualify for free or reduced price lunch.

Using the new curriculum as the anchor, Lewis and her staff embarked on a major outreach effort to engage families. At first, school staff directed efforts toward ensuring that families felt valued in the process. "I see myself as facilitating a learning community that addresses the needs of the school and greater community," Lewis says. "Everyone must feel they are an equal partner in the goal of helping all children succeed." Lewis uses the following example to describe the importance of building trust:

> We have a large Asian population. Many of the husbands are very protective of their families and would not allow their wives in the school building. To build trust, we made sure translators were at every meeting. We scheduled meetings at different times to accommodate parent and/or guardian work schedules. We held cultural celebrations and invited not just the families but also members of the extended family to participate. Also, each month we invited families to participate in recognition days at which children *and* their families would be recognized for their eagerness to learn. Eventually, the husbands decided that our school was safe, and since that time we have had significant family participation.

Lewis directed resources toward professional development activities that helped families increase their support of learning in the home. Here are examples of the strategies Lewis and her staff found helpful in engaging families:

- **HOME RESOURCES.** Each family receives a copy of the new curriculum. A weekly newsletter helps keep families informed about the curriculum.

- **CLASSROOM LEARNING EVENTS.** In the earlier grades, families are invited to their children's classrooms where they can participate in activities alongside their child. Families are invited to the school several evenings per month to meet with their child's teacher to learn strategies they can use at home. This also provides an opportunity for families to network with one another.

- **SATURDAY WORKSHOPS.** Lewis and her staff conduct Saturday workshops for families on topics of mutual interest. Teachers rotate leading these sessions. For example, many families were uncomfortable about the upcoming state assessments. Workshops were held in which parents learned about the tests and how to help their children prepare for them.

- **PARENT FIELD TRIPS.** Throughout the year, Lewis organizes opportunities for families to visit museums and attend arts performances. The goal is to develop the family members' knowledge base to further enhance learning in the home.

- **SOCIAL WORK ASSISTANCE.** Lewis secured foundation support to provide social work assistance to those who are struggling, such as families living in shelters, children in foster care, etc. The goal is to eliminate barriers that may interfere with children's ability to learn in a safe and secure environment.

- **AFTERSCHOOL SUPPORT.** Children are offered a variety of afterschool programs. One of the afterschool programs provides programming for new students (n=187 in 2008) that helps them and their families acclimate to the curriculum and learning program.

According to Lewis, the effort has been worth it. "Our students are learning and achieving at high rates. For example, in 2007, more than 82 percent of students met or exceeded state standards in English/language arts. Students also matched or exceeded the rate of proficiency posted by all New York State students."

Frankford Elementary School—Tapping into Community Resources

Organized initiatives that build community leadership in schools and are aimed at improved student learning are showing promising results (Henderson & Mapp, 2002). Outreach to community organizations involves identifying

opportunities to share resources and participate in joint activities (Molloy, Fleming, Rodriguez, Saavedra, Tucker, & Qillimas, 1995; Southwest Educational Development Laboratory, 2000).

As part of continuing improvement efforts, Frankford Elementary School Principal Duncan Smith looked to the greater community to enhance student learning. "We believe that family *and* community involvement help students be successful. In addition to outreach efforts to families, we also reach out to community groups to form partnerships with our children and their families." To this end, Smith brought in and allocated resources in order to help children and their families.

Frankford Elementary School is located in rural Delaware. It has a population of 525 students. The population increased by 75 students in four years. More than 70 percent of the students are from diverse cultural or ethnic backgrounds. More than 45 percent of the students are Hispanic; many live in homes where English is not spoken. Eighty percent of the students qualify for free or reduced price lunch.

In addition to parent supports in the school (e.g., translator, community liaison, family nights), Smith has focused considerable energy on bringing community partners into the school. "Each year we set as our goal to bring in five new partnerships," Smith says. "These partnerships vary in terms of the nature of their contribution. But in all cases, the partnerships are geared to supporting student achievement."

For example, Smith has turned to civic groups for fundraising. They have provided school dinners, supplies, and technology for the building. During the December holidays, community groups raise money to support children and their families. One couple donates money each year that is used to buy each child two books. "Many groups want to be involved, but they may not know how. It is helpful to let groups know what you are doing and what you need. Sometimes, it is as specific as saying, 'On this day, we need this or that. Can you help us?'"

In addition to funding initiatives, Smith also looks to the community to provide human resources. Frankford boasts a mentor program that includes more than 150 volunteers who spend time each week with a student. Many of these mentors are retirees and members of local churches. Seventy-five high school students also spend time each week reading with the Frankford students. "Since implementing the mentor program, our children have increased their reading level by one and one-half years," Smith reports.

Conclusion

Strong relationships with adults who provide support are essential to the healthy development of children (Zaff & Smerdon, 2008). Principals and staff in successful schools—such as those featured in this *Issue Brief*—have found that respecting and addressing the needs and preferences of families and community members can be instrumental in forming lasting relationships. Through strong partnerships, successful schools are demonstrating the positive impact that family and community involvement can have on student achievement.

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