Helping to Create and Nurture Strong Relationships among Families, Schools and Communities

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The family is the basic foundation or core root of an individual's household and community. Webster's Dictionary defines a family as, "a group of individual's living under one roof and usually under one headship" and a community as "people with common interests living in a particular area." When communities and schools form partnerships in the educational journey, the union makes for stronger, life long learners for students and their families. Research has shown that students tend to be more successful in school when educators, families and community members work together to support learning (Barton, 2007; Ferguson, 2008).

Student learning is a tribal cycle, meaning students learn from all aspects of their life (Barton, 2007; Ferguson, 2008). Maximum learning for students take place when they are in homes with good family structures and in communities with buy in from stakeholders who have vested interests in the community itself. Thriving communities bring a great amount of resources that could assist in enhancing the growth and learning for all individuals. Understanding such, the question becomes, how can administrators, parents, teachers and community leaders' support and nurture strong relationships to engaged families, and communities in supporting our schools and student learning? And further, how do we bridge the gap for successful relationships to foster a successful process in

school? The key lies in really understanding the important roles families and communities play in supporting children's learning in and out of school. In order to enhance the roles of the two, a partnership must be formed. Building such partnerships requires visioning, strategic planning, and creative leadership with new, multifaceted roles for professionals who work in the schools and communities (Kretzmann and McKinght, 1993).

In order to create these kinds of bonds between families, schools and communities, everyone must work together to achieve focused goals that are designed to provide, above all, 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, and Melaville, 2006; Ferguson, 2008; Resto and Alston, 2006).

School sponsored activities and events are ideas that can possibly work within schools and communities in order to formulate strong bonds with the family and schools. These ideas are most time spearheaded by the school administrator, parent and community groups and/or the PTO group. For instance, the Jackson Public School District (JPSD) in Jackson, Mississippi has a school enrollment of approximately 30,000 students and receives a large portion of Title funds because about fifty percent of its students receive free and reduce lunch. The administrators and staff in JPSD rely heavily on parents and community initiatives to help students to be successful. The Parent Teacher Association (PTA) is valued in the communities and assists to support many of district's initiatives aimed at keeping parents and communities informed and connected to its schools. Of the district's many initiatives are grant sponsored programs that provide after-school care and instruction to increase the likelihood of student success. Also, a 21st

Century sponsored grant provides funding for additional after school programs in which parents would not otherwise be able to afford. In addition, there is a "Watch Dog" program which seeks to increase the efforts of men to be involved and present in schools as a source of support and to serves as mentors and role models for fatherless male students. Many of the efforts and initiatives are intended to help students learn with guided principles and to develop values needed to help them to be successful academically and to develop appropriate social skills.

"Parent's Night Out" is an event in elementary and middle schools designed to develop partnerships to connect the school and communities together. During Parent's Night Out, schools structure an agenda to have school personnel such as the offices of curriculum, exceptional education, and student services as well as the school resource officer, parent liaison and the school counselor who provide an open forum to discuss and plan student academics, extra curricular activities, organizational structure, student behavior and other issues that affect the students home and school learning environments. Also, parents can discuss important home life issues confidentially with school personnel. By having an open discussion during these type meetings, school administrators in the JPSD hope to open up dialogue with parents to see if the school can do anything to help maximize the success of their students at school and home. The school, in turn, seeks assistance from parents in order to help with student discipline issues and other concerns from the school perspective.

Schools, families, and other learning institutions need consistent and aligned support to help children achieve their academic potential. Providing support to students and families is a shared responsibility for closing the achievement gap and supporting

success to all students. Research shows that in order to maximize the chances for a strong return on investment in non-school learning settings. All families need to be engaged and supported in reinforcing children learning ability (Westmoreland, 2010).

Strong relationships with parents and the community have to be the core foundation in order to develop a healthy relationship of students with in school (Zaff and Smerdon, 2008). Most of the activities to help build positive relationships with students, schools and parents are inexpensive and easy. These types of partnerships are great ways to encourage parents and extended families to feel welcome at the school. In order to achieve this, school administrators and personnel should implement an "open door policy" to involve the community, families, and other stakeholders towards school effectiveness by engaging the learning of students with the support of parents and communities. Teachers should engage lines of communication with families by with simple measures such as phone calls to discuss not what's going wrong, but to build personal relationships with parents and communities about the things that are right and working well for students. In order develop a nurturing, continuous, and successful relationship with families and communities, the school must practice these principles from the start through the end of school year in order to see growth and promote success.

While there are many challenges for educators, there are also plenty of examples to help with the success of establishing relationships with families of students. Much of the research shows an increase in student achievement. Successful student achievement is definitely tied to good leadership practices in the schools. Students are motivated by goals and great expectations. Thus, when schools are required to provide plans for success or improvement, communities and families should be included in the plans to

ensure great success for students (Hair, E., Moore., K., King, T., McPhee-Baker, C. & Brown, B. 2009).

In conclusion, there is much work and a continuous process must be repeated over and over again to produces effective and meaningful relationships with schools and families. We must shape a cultural of learning through establishing successful routines for student's success. We must produce and hire administrators that have a heart for education and a passion for school, family, and community success. As educators we must get into the classrooms, find mentors for our students, use the good data to support the purpose and always be open to explore new avenues for success that reach all students and families. Together we can nurture great relationships with schools, families, and communities for student's success.

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