

# *Collaboration: A Key to Successful Professional Development Engagement With Students and Parents*

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**ABSTRACT:** This article describes the significance of academic enrichment and English as a second language in a community-based professional development middle school. As an example of a university–school partnership that is responding to the needs of its students, parents, and community, the Baylor University School of Education has partnered with the César Chávez Middle School in the Waco Independent School District. Middle schools are critical in our communities because it is at this level that so many students decide to continue or drop out.

In a South Waco community, there is a need to conceptualize education as involving parents beyond meetings to include English as a second language (ESL), the GED, and other types of educational experiences. The positive effect of having support from people other than parents with children in the school is the community support for the school’s mission. They listen to the expressed needs of students and parents. The driving force for change should be the vision for an improved educational community through collaboration and not the limited funding available. Using multiple resources to form partnerships with organizations that share this vision should be the goal of progressive PDS programs.

As Latino parents we have to help our children in every way possible. Simply because we don’t speak English very well doesn’t mean that we can’t support our children to succeed in school. We value education, and there is much that we do at home every day. And staying involved in the school to watch over them is an extension of our parental responsibility. (Gaitan, 2004, p. vii)

Encouraging families to meet their goal of supporting their children started with a simple request from a university education professor to an inner-city professional development school principal: “Give me 50 of your most academically challenged students who need additional support to be educationally successful.” What followed was an ongoing lesson in how achieving educational success is a family and community affair. Even if parents want to help their children, they will struggle without the use of English and an understanding of American education (America Reads, 1999). This article describes a community-based collaboration between the Baylor University School of Education and a professional development middle school’s attempt to build family legacies and transform its surrounding geographic community through academic enrichment for students and ESL for their parents.

Research and experience support the concept that children share the legacy of their parents’ educational and economic achievements. Parents who have no reading skills have children who consistently perform poorly

on grade-level tests (Hayes, 2002). Adults pass on to children their own expectations about education and achievement (Padak & Rasinski, 1997). Parents whose literacy improves have children whose school performance improves (Mikulecky & Lloyd, 1995) and who make impressive long-term gains in health, education, and economic status (Padak & Rasinski, 1997).

Sticht (2002), an international consultant in adult education, stated that “education of the children’s parents will lead to better educated, more employable parents and more educable children” (n.p.). For disadvantaged children to have a genuine opportunity to succeed educationally and develop their potential, they need academic enrichment and parents who are themselves engaged in learning (Gaitan, 2004).

This understanding of the importance of the family in education as well as a basic philosophical change in educational delivery has led to the creation of a multidimensional family literacy program at César Chávez Middle School (CCMS), in Waco, Texas. CCMS was established in 2001 as a professional development school in South Waco by the Waco Independent School District and the Baylor University School of Education. Education professors developed a new certification program that moved many of their classes from the university campus to professional development schools and incorporated the examination of its impact on the development of teachers as well as middle school students. This program paradigm shift was the impetus that led me, a professor of education, to ask Alfredo Loredó, principal of CCMS, to identify struggling students who had never passed the Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills (TAKS), the Texas annual achievement exam.

CCMS is an inner-city middle school that was built to be a professional development school; it has an enrollment of 425 students, and it serves students in Grades 6–8. According to the Waco Independent School District (Waco ISD), the ethnic composition of the families in the CCMS neighborhood is as follows: 88% Hispanic, 9% African Ameri-

can, and 3% Anglo. More than 95% of the elementary and middle school students in this area participate in the free/reduced-price lunch program. In 1999, Spanish was the language of 42% of the households, and of these, nearly 1 in 3 was considered linguistically isolated (U.S. Census Bureau, 1999). Thirty-four percent of the students in South Waco are enrolled in bilingual/ESL classes, compared to 10% in the Waco ISD and 14% statewide; 39% are considered to have limited English proficiency. Only 73% of the Hispanic students met the 2002 TAKS reading standard, 17% less than the Waco ISD and statewide averages. The retention rates for Grades K–3 at the CCMS feeder schools are higher than those of the district and the state, with 17% of the students retained in first grade.

## Reaching Out to Community-Based and Education Partners

Professional development schools should not stand alone in their relationship with the university and the local school district. Collaboration among a range of community-based and education partners has been the foundation for the development of this ongoing project, including CCMS; Baylor University’s School of Education, whose faculty members developed and operate Learning English Among Friends (LEAF); GEAR UP Waco; McLennan County Youth Collaboration; and AVANCE–Waco (see Table 1). Each partner realizes that the possibility for success increases through cooperation among equals, rather than through competition. CCMS has been recognized as a good middle school because of the principal and number of teachers who have been selected as most outstanding in the district.

The campus is conveniently located near the center of the neighborhood, with a city bus stop a half block away. It is one of 10 professional development schools associated with the Waco ISD that have joined with Baylor University to form a distinctive on-site education training program. A commitment by

Table 1. Learning English Among Friends (LEAF) Multipartner Collaboration

<i>Program</i>	<i>Population Served</i>	<i>Teachers</i>	<i>Times</i>
English Rocks	Grades 6–8 at CCMS	Volunteers teaching an active English curriculum of reading and writing.	M–Th 4:00–5:30 p.m.
Cool Math	Grades 6–8 at CCMS	Volunteers teaching a math curriculum that is manipulative based and engaging	M–Th 4:00–5:30 p.m.
ESL	Parents of CCMS students	Baylor ESL students and volunteers	Th 5:30–7:00 p.m.
Breaking Out	Children of LEAF participants, ages 1–4	AVANCE certified/licensed staff	Th 5:30–7:00 p.m.
LEAF Kids	Children of LEAF participants, Grades 1–6	Curriculum developed by graduate students and carried out by Baylor volunteers	Th 5:30–7:00 p.m.
Baylor Buddies	Grades 6–8 at CCMS	TED 1312 students who are Baylor freshmen and studying to become secondary school teachers	T + Th 8:30–9:00 a.m.

Note. ESL = English as a second language; CCMS = César Chávez Middle School.

CCMS administrators, teachers, and staff to being a potent force for improving the quality of life in the community is foundational to the array of programs and events hosted by CCMS.

Founded in 1845, Baylor University seeks “to educate men and women for worldwide leadership and service.” To fulfill its mission, Baylor not only provides high-caliber academic instruction but emphasizes community service by its students, faculty, and staff. Carrying out this university mission, the Baylor University School of Education’s professional development program is committed to helping every child do well in school and has been significantly involved with CCMS since its creation. Interdisciplinary collaboration in this university–community partnership is a natural outgrowth of its complementary fields of practice and mutual commitment to field-based education. The development of the LEAF program has enhanced this collaboration, by teaching adults English and helping them understand American education.

GEAR UP (Gaining Early Awareness and Readiness for Undergraduate Programs) is a partner that provides funding through a discretionary grant program of the U.S. Department of Education, designed to increase the number of low-income students who are prepared to enter and succeed in postsecond-

ary education. Now in its 7th year, GEAR UP Waco supports 20 programs in the Waco ISD that provide a continuous system of mentoring, advising, counseling, and tutoring for students and parents in the district. GEAR UP Waco begins with cohorts of students in the seventh grade and follows them through high school. Recognizing the long-term value of learning together as parents and children, GEAR UP Waco has provided funds for family meals since LEAF’s inception, in 2003, and for curriculum materials from the Oxford University Literacy Series.

The McLennan County Youth Collaboration has been a substantial partner of the LEAF program, including it in its 21st Century grant, which provides funds so that faculty can work with struggling students in an after-school tutorial program. Students who attend these sessions complete homework assignments and receive help, filling in learning blocks missed during earlier years. Because of its success, this grant was renewed for another 5 years.

During LEAF’s 1st year, I began forming a relationship with another partner, AVANCE–Waco, a community-based nonprofit that encourages its predominately Spanish-speaking participants to enroll in the LEAF program to learn English. Located a few blocks from CCMS, AVANCE–Waco provides family support and education services

to at-risk low-socioeconomic families with children younger than 3 years. The AVANCE model, which has been tested and refined for more than 30 years, focuses on building the self-esteem, confidence, and competence of parents and children within a family and community context. During the past 3 years, more than 180 families have graduated from its 9-month program. LEAF and AVANCE–Waco leaders quickly recognized that together their programs serve community residents from birth through adulthood, with LEAF providing some continuity of family-centered educational programming for graduates of the AVANCE–Waco program.

The initial success of LEAF’s multipartner collaboration stems from a common concern for and attention to the environment in which students live and learn. Each organization considers the family the most influential context for learning, followed by the school and the wider community. In addition, each program, in its own way, attempts to transform the students’ environment, with its respective programs addressing key elements in each venue. Whether it is enriching classroom curriculum, tutoring after school, or teaching parenting skills, the focus is on enriching the environment in which the students live and learn and then on empowering their families to take advantage of the opportunities at hand.

### Site-Based Development of LEAF

As a result of the conversation between myself and Loreda, 25 middle school students met for 45 minutes of tutoring twice a week with my education students in the fall of 2001. The number of middle school students participating in this program doubled in spring 2002. After the 1st year of this program, the at-risk bilingual Hispanic students who attended these tutoring sessions succeeded in the state-mandated exam for the first time. During the tutoring sessions, the teachers discovered that most students came from households in which the adults did not read, write, or speak English. Further investigation schoolwide revealed that

70% of all the parents of CCMS students did not speak English. The combination of parents who did not understand the American education system and their lack of proficiency in English created substantial barriers to interaction between parents and school personnel. CCMS identified this problem as a “family–community issue” that needed to be addressed if the students were going to be successful in their educational experience.

Once the scope of the problem was recognized, the Campus Decision Making Committee played a key role in addressing these larger issues. The committee is responsible for implementing planning processes and site-based decision making for the school. Composed of business and community leaders, parents, Waco ISD teachers and administrators, and friends of the school, including the Baylor University liaison for CCMS (myself), the committee meets monthly to discuss ways to improve the school and increase parental involvement. Far from being a rubber stamp for school administrators, the committee obtains broad-based community, parent, and staff input and provides information to those persons on a systematic basis.

Building on the school’s good relationship with Baylor University, the Campus Decision Making Committee invited me to establish a literacy program as a bridge to engage the families of South Waco with the school while I was working as the university liaison with Baylor teaching associates and interns during the school day.

After a year of planning and preparation, LEAF was launched in the fall of 2003. LEAF initially targeted parents with children enrolled at CCMS; however, widespread interest led to its welcoming any community resident. Because of the collaboration with GEAR UP Waco and the McLennan County Youth Collaboration, LEAF has now expanded to six locations throughout Waco: Carver Professional Development Middle School, Tennyson Professional Development Middle School, Lake Air Middle School, Brazos Middle School, University Middle School, and Waco High Professional Development School. By spring 2007, enrollment grew to more than 300 adults

Table 2. Collaboration: Support for Learning English Among Friends

<i>Support</i>	<i>Provision</i>	<i>Years</i>
Educational		
Baylor University School of Education	Faculty and students from English-as-a-second language classes and TED 1312 who tutor struggling students	
César Chávez/Waco ISD	Building	
Financial: Grants		
GEAR UP Waco	Four graduate students, supplies, and weekly dinners	6
21st Century	Two graduate students, two tutorial assistants, and supplies	2
Dollar General	Books for the library	2
Allergan	One graduate student and supplies for math/English tutoring	1
CenTex Chamber of Commerce	One graduate student, supplies for math/English tutoring after Allergan	1
Rapoport Foundation	Two graduate students, funds for infant care, and supplies for K–6 enrichment program	2
Baylor/Waco Foundation <sup>a</sup>	Ten laptops and five desk computers	—
Community		
AVANCE–Waco	Infant support and child care promotion	
McLennan Community College	GED instructors	
University Baptist Church	Volunteers	
Baylor students	Volunteers	

<sup>a</sup>Onetime award.

in the expanded program. Although this program has grown to several locations, this article focuses on the beginning work and collaboration at CCMS, the flagship site of the program.

So who comes to this program? The ESL participants range in age from 18 to 73, with a median age of 23; all are immigrants from Mexico; and none has more than a fifth-grade education. Setting the stage for a successful evening of learning is the insight of about 52 Baylor students who volunteer each week to teach lesson plans that are written by Baylor faculty for this location and based on the Oxford University Press Literacy Series. After class, LEAF provides a family dinner during which a guest speaker makes a presentation about a topic of interest to participants (e.g., fire safety, making toys for children at home, community safety from police chief, parenting skills; see Table 2).

### Growth Through External Foundation Funding

Although CCMS students had made substantial progress in their TAKS reading scores,

their performance in math lagged significantly. After the Texas Education Agency altered the math portion of TAKS in 2003, the passing rate at CCMS fell to 55%. It was not certain if the low scores were due to a lack of understanding of math concepts, English language deficiencies, or both. To address this challenge, I spearheaded the development of Cool Math Literacy in the 2004–2005 school year, a program that integrated math enrichment in the classroom with intensive after-school tutoring 4 days a week from 4:00 to 5:30 p.m. The curriculum included exercises for strengthening English comprehension of math vocabulary, as well as individualized assessments of math deficiencies and targeted remediation. Encouraged by the success of the first tutoring program, I asked Loredó to refer the 50 lowest-performing students in math in the school. To fund this initiative, Baylor University turned to a nontraditional source: the Allergan Corporation, an international medical products manufacturing firm with a plant in Waco. With its own foundation, at its headquarters in Southern California, the Allergan Corporation shared this commitment to early intervention and the focus on improving



math skills, awarding LEAF a \$10,000 grant in the fall of 2004. This project was continued in 2005–2006 with a grant funded by the Cen-Tex Hispanic Chamber of Commerce and the League of United Latin American Citizens. Through this project and others, the TAKS scores in 2007 finally improved by more than 20 points, to a more respectable 73% passing rate. The results of years of work culminated in 2007, with the Texas Education Agency certifying CCMS as the only recognized secondary school in Waco ISD. Many people worked together to make this level of recognition happen, but the tutoring and parental involvement have formed an internal and external support for the success that has been achieved. Researchers have shown that in many schools, parental involvement decreases at the middle school level—a factor that can cause problems with students being academically successful or moving educationally further than middle school (Barber & Patin, 1997). However, the increased involvement of parents at CCMS has been one of the significant factors that have reversed this trend and helped it to become more than just acceptable according to the State of Texas education standards.

Witnessing week after week a library overflowing with more than 100 adults who, after a long day of work, eagerly invested another hour of energy learning English had a transforming effect on the entire LEAF team. LEAF had clearly become more than a showcase ESL program; it became a symbol of a community awakening to the possibility of life being as members dreamed when they immigrated to the United States. After 3 years of attending class, one successful LEAF student said, “The LEAF program has changed my life! I have been able to obtain good enough use of English to move from a cafeteria worker to the cafeteria manager in just 3 years.”

The program leaders were also encouraged by a local family foundation. The Rapoport Foundation had given grants in 2004 and 2006 to articulate an emerging vision of a South Waco where all residents develop their potential as human beings in the context of healthy families and a thriving community. With the theme of “Strengthening Families,

Building Community,” LEAF has developed six long-term goals in four categories: education, employment, health, and family and community life (see Table 3). These goals serve as a framework for current programs and future planning. With financial support from the Rapoport Foundation and the Baylor/Waco Foundation, LEAF expanded in its 2nd year beyond ESL for adults and math tutoring and enrichment for middle school students to a more full-fledged family literacy program with the following components:

- LEAF Kids on Thursday evenings with reading enrichment for K–4 children;
- literacy instruction via puppet shows for preK–5 children;
- educationally enriched child care based on the AVANCE model for children 3 years old and younger;
- extended instruction time to 80 minutes for all participants;
- structured parent–child together time on Thursday evenings;
- parent–child together time at home using books and audiotapes based on Thursday’s lesson themes;
- language labs equipped with Rosetta Stone English-language learning software (4 computers at AVANCE, 30 at CCMS, and 10 laptops that families can check out for use at home, as supported by the Baylor/Waco Foundation); and
- quarterly educational family-centered field trips for the families of all LEAF participants, with special efforts to involve fathers.

## The Impact of Partnerships

One of the positive aspects of a progressive middle school is flexibility. Realizing that about two thirds of the student body needed academic help, Loredó opened the CCMS doors to a Baylor University class to tutor the students for 2 days per week, Tuesdays and Thursdays (see multipartner collaboration chart; Table 1). To enhance the professional

Table 3. Goals and Objectives: “Strengthening Families, Building Community”—A Collaboration for South Waco

<i>Category</i>	<i>Goals</i>	<i>Objectives for 2006–2007 (2007–2008)</i>
Education	<p>With their parents' active support, every child will be making satisfactory progress in learning at home, preschool, or school.</p> <p>Every adult will be proficient in reading, writing, and speaking English.</p> <p>Every adult will have a high school diploma or GED or be making progress toward it.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Enroll 300 (550) adults in ESL of whom 75% will show an increase of one grade level according to pre–post scores on the Basic English Skills Test.</li> <li>• Enroll 20% (40%) of AVANCE's ESL participants in LEAF, of whom 95% will progress one grade level.</li> <li>• Continue to replicate the LEAF program for parents and their at-risk children in six Waco Independent School District schools.</li> <li>• Enroll 15–20 adults in a GED program, of whom 60% will make satisfactory progress each quarter and 70% who take the exams will receive their GED. This work has begun at Tennyson Middle School (2006–2007).</li> </ul>
Family and community	All family units, including single adults, will be engaged in the life of the community through social, religious, recreational, educational, and/or civic activities.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 90% (90%) of the individuals who are enrolled in one of LEAF's programs at César Chávez Middle School will regularly participate with their families in the family dinner program on Thursday evenings (meal + community resource or Parent–Teacher Association presentation).</li> <li>• 50% (75%) of the families with someone enrolled in an AVANCE or LEAF program will participate in at least one field trip during the year.</li> <li>• Document the formal and informal organizational and leadership assets of South Waco, including nonprofit organizations, congregations, schools, clubs, and businesses.</li> </ul>
Employment	All adults with a high school diploma or GED who want to work will be engaged in postsecondary education or learning that prepares them for employment or advancement in employment.	<i>Objectives to be developed later as needs are assessed in more detail.</i>
Health	Every adult will have fundamental knowledge about personal health care and the health care system in central Texas.	<i>Objectives to be developed later as needs are assessed in more detail.</i>

Note. ESL = English as a second language; LEAF = Learning English Among Friends.

development goals of the school, 120 Baylor University freshmen education students (novices) were assigned two students each to tutor in English language arts, and they thus became the CCMS Baylor Buddies. For classes to remain intact and add this additional academic assistance, Loredó took 5 minutes off each class in order to add 30 minutes for the “zero

hour”; that is, good education principles indicate that the beginning of the day is the most effective time for students to learn subjects that are challenging to them. It took only a few years for success to be realized, as indicated in Figure 1.

At the same time, the other one third of the student body, who are advanced academic

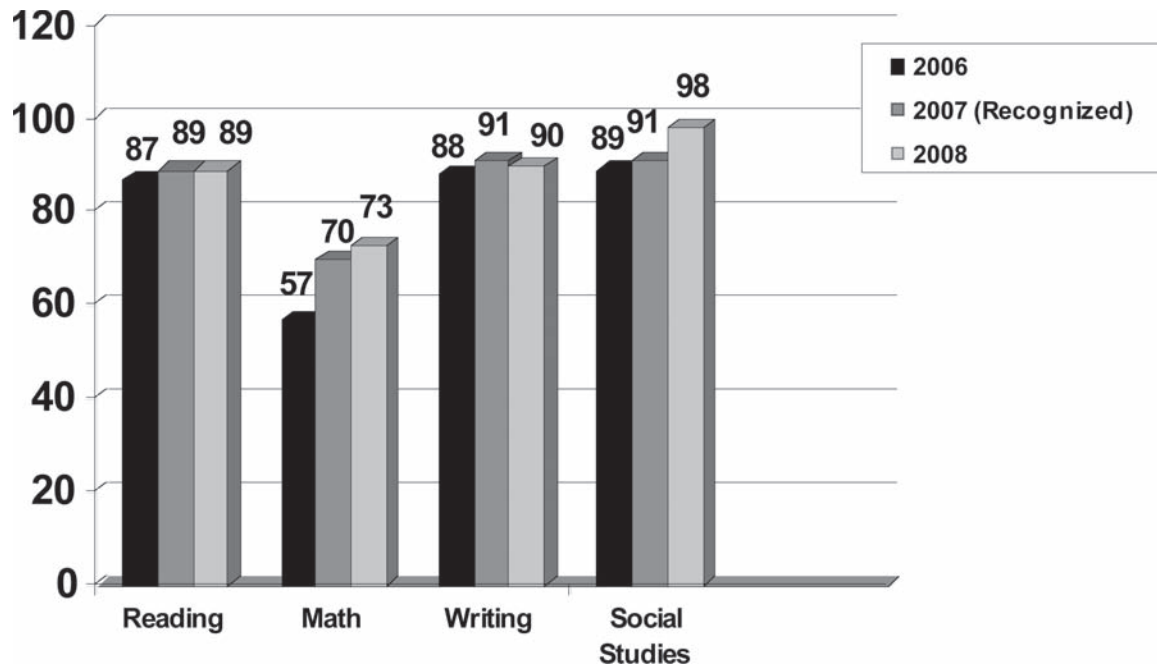


Figure 1. 2006–2008 TAKS Scores for César Chávez Middle School

students (Athens students), work on University Interscholastic League contest materials with César Chávez faculty and Baylor University senior education majors (interns), the latter of whom teach all day for a year and are an integral part of the academic program at CCMS. Benefits of this two-pronged approach have been the positive growth of the English language arts scores on the TAKS test in a school that is so predominately Hispanic, as well as more students' receiving awards at the local University Interscholastic League contest.

Not only are the students benefiting from the relationships that have been built with the Baylor Buddies, but the parents are beginning to understand the goals of education and the importance of the school in their lives and the community's. Through LEAF, these parents have been brought face-to-face with Baylor University interns who have been teaching their children. These relationships have personalized the educational experience. Also, during the semester, teachers from different academic areas drop by LEAF and visit with parents to give them another opportunity to identify their children's teachers. These two means of helping parents get in touch

with education have helped them see that education is more than just learning facts from books. These parents learn from the teachers what questions they need to be asking their children at home about their subjects when they are studying together outside the school environment. They feel more confident about coming to the school to ask questions about how they can help their children become better students. The relationships among the parents, students, teachers, and administration are directly related to an increased reduction in the number of students in in-school suspension.

As parents understand more about American education, they become more interested in becoming a part of their children's school lives. Before the beginning of LEAF, the Parent-Teacher Association drew fewer than 10 parents to its monthly meeting. Now, almost 100 parents attend each monthly meeting. Other activities of the school, such as sports events, academic competitions, band concerts, and art displays, are now well attended by the students' families.

The school is now developing into the center of activity for the 40-block area of South Waco after only 5 years of work. First



tutoring with students (2001–2003), then working with their parents (2003–present), and now working on math and English (2003–present), achievement has moved the school and community forward. When the parents were asked what they wanted South Waco to be, they said they wanted it to be like North Waco—beautiful buildings and homes. Once CCMS was built, they felt as though North Waco had come to them. A new energy and hope was immediately established with the new middle school building. Parental and family involvement in the lives of the children through the academic enrichment taking place added to this energy and hope. Once again, the importance of the vibrancy of the local community-based school becomes important to transforming an entire community. After years of dormancy, new homes are being built; old homes are being remodeled; and a new community pride is being established.

## Conclusion

This article has shown the importance of academic enrichment and ESL in a community-based professional development middle school. CCMS is an example of a school responding to the needs of its students, parents, and community. Middle schools need to be open to opportunities that bring change.

Additionally, I found that linking the needs of children in a middle school with parental education and involvement and community building brings about change not only in the school but also in its neighborhood. The following points are most significant: First, in a disadvantaged community, there is a need to conceptualize education as involving parents beyond meetings to include ESL, GED, and other types of educational experiences. Second, there is a need to conceptualize beyond the school building (i.e., school personnel and students). The positive effect of involving people other than parents with children in the school leads to community support of the school's mission. Third, the administration of a program such as LEAF

needs to include a site-based team willing to be innovative and take risks. Fourth, educators need to listen to the expressed needs of students and parents. Fifth, the vision of education and community growth are not limited to funding needs as the driver for change. Sixth, educators need to use the resources at hand to form partnerships with organizations that share the vision of educational and community growth.

With parents, teachers, and community support, many students are seeing the value of education. Twenty-first-century professional development schools need to collaborate with other community-based programs and agencies to make sure that change is going to occur. More research needs to be conducted to determine the long-term effects of providing English-language training for parents and their support of their students' academic achievement. The short span of this work and research indicates a positive correlation, but a longer study needs to be undertaken to see if the growth in achievement for parents and students continues to enhance the entire community. This joint effort by multiple entities provides a strong basis for families in a truly holistic way and begins to end the cycle of poverty through education. <sup>SUP</sup>

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