

# A BLUEPRINT FOR EMPOWERING FAMILIES:

## The National Standards for Family-School Partnerships

By Sherri Wilson

The six National Standards for Family-School Partnerships provide a research-based framework for strengthening family engagement programs, activities, and policies by shifting the focus from what schools should do to involve parents, to what parents, schools, and communities can do together to support student success. An adjunct to the National Standards is the *Assessment Guide*. This guide is a great place to start to help families and schools determine how well they are meeting the Standards by offering indicators of family engagement:

- **Level 1: Emerging**—Limited level of development and implementation
- **Level 2: Progressing**—Functioning level of development and implementation
- **Level 3: Excelling**—Highly functioning level of development and implementation

While each of the standards forms a critical component in a comprehensive family-engagement program, many schools still struggle with the implementation of Standard 5: Sharing power.

### Characteristics of Standard 5: Sharing Power

Standard 5 addresses whether families and school staff and administration are equal partners in decisions that affect children and families and together inform, influence, and create policies, practices, and programs.

Standard 5 has two goals:

- Strengthening the family's voice in shared decision making
- Building families' social and political connections

PTAs can use the *Assessment Guide* to help schools identify how well they are sharing power and then work with them to develop strategies to devise means to better share power with families.

**Shared decision making.** The first goal of Standard 5 is strengthening the family's voice in shared decision making. There are three indicators that demonstrate schools have met this goal:

- How much families have a voice in all decisions that affect children
- How well the school addresses equity issues
- How well the school develops parent leadership

*How much families have a voice in all decisions that affect children*—Schools that are emerging tell families issues or proposed changes and give them an opportunity to respond. Progressing schools take this action a step further by also holding dialogues with families and school personnel to exchange ideas about the issues. Schools that are excelling inform families, hold dialogues, and have an established policy that allows parents to have an equal voice in all major decisions affecting students.

*How well schools address equity issues*—Emerging schools have parent groups that work with school leaders to identify barriers to

effective family engagement. Schools that are progressing have parent groups that work with school leaders to address issues related to diversity of race, income, and culture. Schools that are excelling have parent groups that work with school leaders to accomplish both of these objectives and work with the school improvement team to adopt effective strategies to engage families in reducing achievement gaps between groups of students.

*How well the school develops parent leadership*—A school that is emerging has PTA or other parent leaders who reach out to parents from diverse backgrounds and invite them to become involved in the PTA or parent group. A school that is progressing has PTA or parent groups that not only invite parents from diverse backgrounds to become involved, but also provide them with specific opportunities to volunteer at school. A school that is excelling has PTA or parent leaders who invite and specifically involve diverse families and who are trained in facilitating activities that encourage everyone to speak up.


**Building families' social and political connections.** Families need to have a strong, broad-based organization that offers regular opportunities to develop relationships and raise concerns with school leaders, public officials, and business and community leaders. There are two indicators that demonstrate a school has met this goal:

- Connecting families to local officials
- Developing an effective parent involvement organization that represents all families

*Connecting families to local officials*—Schools that are emerging provide written materials in multiple languages on local government and community services. Schools that are progressing provide written materials in multiple languages and host regular meetings with local officials, such as school board members and local community leaders, so families can learn about resources in the community. Schools that are excelling provide written materials, hold meetings with community leaders and have principals or parent leaders who personally invite public officials to meetings to discuss issues facing the community.

*Developing an effective parent involvement organization that represents all families*—Schools that are emerging have PTA or other parent leaders who receive leadership training. Schools that are progressing have such parent leaders who also reach out to families who are not involved to identify their interests, concerns, and priorities. Schools that are excelling have trained parent leaders who reach out to disconnected families and build their effectiveness by recruiting and maintaining a leadership team that reflects the school and community and by aligning all programs and practices with the National Standards for Family-School Partnerships.

## Partnerships that improve our children's futures

Families, teachers, and administrators have one goal in common: they all want to see children succeed. The challenge we face is discovering ways to work together to achieve that goal. To foster an environment where partnerships thrive, schools must move beyond simply providing parents with volunteer opportunities and allow them to become full partners in the education of their children. Once families and schools develop strong partnerships, it's easier to address other challenges as they arise. The six National Standards for Family-School Partnerships provide a research-based framework to help school communities partner effectively. 

*Sherri Wilson is National PTA's senior manager for family engagement.*

### Case Study: Kate Waller Barrett Elementary PTA

Each year, National PTA's Phoebe Apperson Hearst Family-School Partnership Award recognizes and celebrates achievement in building effective family-school partnerships. Schools that win the Hearst Award provide a real-world example of how the standards look in practice. In 2010, the Hearst Award went to Kate Waller Barrett Elementary PTA in Arlington, Virginia.

Barrett is a school that faces a number of challenges. Its student population is 62 percent minority; 51 percent of the students are eligible for free or reduced-price lunches. According to the Barrett Elementary School PTA, "K.W. Barrett Elementary has long recognized that its efforts to improve student achievement require the enlistment of the entire school community." This PTA and the school have found a way to turn its challenges into strengths while providing a great example of how to use Standard 5 of the National Standards for Family-School Partnerships.

Barrett Elementary PTA sends home written information in multiple languages each week and conducts outreach to diverse families to fill leadership positions. The principal at Barrett consults a parent advisory group that represents the diversity within the school. When Arlington Public Schools asked families to give input online on the school budget, Barrett PTA members and faculty worked together to make school computers available and assist families in completing the survey.

Because of its large Spanish-speaking population, Barrett has implemented PARTICIPA, a seven-week course designed to help immigrant families navigate the school system to better support and advocate for their children's education. The course provides Latino parents with an opportunity to examine student achievement data by race and ethnicity. PARTICIPA regularly invites school and community leaders to act as guest speakers at meetings and at the culmination of each seven-week course. In 2010, the Barrett faculty took a professional development course in cultural competence. During this course, they discussed achievement gap data, investigated its causes, and identified best practices they could use to close the gap.

## Resources

*The National Standards for Family-School Partnerships: An Implementation Guide* and *The National Standards for Family-School Partnerships Assessment Guide* are available online at [PTA.org/standards](http://PTA.org/standards).

*Beyond the Bake Sale: The Essential Guide to Family-School Partnerships*, by Anne T. Henderson, Karen L. Mapp, Vivian R. Johnson, and Don Davies (New York: The New Press, 2007), includes a school climate survey that can be an excellent action research project. Download the survey and other sample tools from the book for free at [www.thenewpress.com/bakesale](http://www.thenewpress.com/bakesale).

The Commonwealth Institute for Parent Leadership, developed by the Prichard Committee for Academic Excellence, is a parent leadership training program in education. It has graduated more than 1,500 parents across the state of Kentucky in the past 11 years. To learn how to start a program in your area, go to [www.cipl.org](http://www.cipl.org).

The National Issues Forums group offers workshops and a starter kit on how to organize public forums on community issues and also helps sponsor forums. Learn more at [www.nifi.org](http://www.nifi.org).

Have you been working hard to meet Standard 5? Why not help out other PTAs! Log onto the PTA Great Idea Bank ([www.ptagreatideabank.org](http://www.ptagreatideabank.org)) and share your ideas, or send them to National PTA at [swilson@pta.org](mailto:swilson@pta.org) so we can highlight them for you.