Organizing Family and Community Connections With Schools:
How Do School Staff Build Meaningful Relationships With All Stakeholders?

By Chris Ferguson

Twenty years of research on school performance has created a body of knowledge that grounds today's school improvement efforts and has resulted in a concise list of characteristics that are common to high-performing schools (Berman & Chambliss, 2000; McLaughlin, 1990; Cuban, 1988; Elmore, & McLaughlin, 1988; Fullan, 1993; Griffin & Barnes, 1984). As accountability becomes more and more important, educational leaders across the nation are actively attempting to foster these qualities in their schools:

1. **A shared understanding of goals and expectations for all involved in the school system**

2. **High academic standards clearly defining what students are to know and be able to do**

3. **A strong cadre of leaders providing support for the goals and expectations of the school and the school community**

4. **Procedures for purposeful collection and analysis of data on students, programs, and staff**

5. **Strong relationships with family and community partners**

Unfortunately, schools and districts commonly expend most of their time and effort developing the first four qualities and neglect to build strong relationships with family and community. These relationships can result in additional support for improvement efforts, and with the ever-increasing demands on schools to continually improve, schools need to maximize every possible resource.

However, simply encouraging or even mandating that all schools enact strategies that promote family and community connections is not as easily done as said. Musti-Rao and Cartledge (2004) describe a mother's feelings after she is asked by the school to help her child read at home:

The school has consistently advised her to read to her son and to get him to read to her. This advice has merit, but for this parent with a high-school education and employed in the service industry, the advice was somewhat vague and hollow. Unarticulated questions might have been, "How much do I read during each session? How do I structure these readings? How do I know he is making progress? How can I measure this progress? Would you show me how I should read to/with him?" (p. 16)

If school leaders desire to actively engage families in purposeful actions to support student learning, they need to design an effort that will provide parents with the tools and strategies to do this as well as work with them to insure that they understand how to use these tools.

One of the first steps in this process is to develop purposeful relationships between family members and school staff. The key to using this often untapped resource is what Mapp (2003) calls the "joining process," a systemic effort to meaningfully engage all stakeholders in a process characterized by common understandings and shared decision making. As can be seen in Ms. López's school in the School Snapshot (page 2), bringing families into the school is not enough; school staff need to initiate efforts to build a trusting relationship between the school staff and families so they can work as a team to meet student needs.

SCHOOL SNAPSHOT

Ms. López is the family involvement coordinator for an elementary school, serving grades 3–6, in a large city school district. During the last 6 years, an influx of immigrants has changed the school's demographics significantly. While the community is accepting of these changes on the surface, an obvious cultural rift is developing among population groups. Comments such as "We used to be able to. . . but now. . ." have become prevalent in the community and the school. Moreover, the staff are unfamiliar with the home context of these new students. Little effort has been made to connect with these families.

Ms. López and her principal talk about this situation after attending a family and community involvement conference during the summer. They decide that the school staff should refocus family involvement efforts to create the "joining process" that had been introduced at the summer training. Their previous efforts included having parents help with class parties, partnering with parent organizations for fund raising, hosting a mother to school day, and holding an open house. While Ms. López and her principal want to continue many of these efforts, they also want to develop new kinds of family-school interactions.

They meet with the staff in the early fall and share the information they have learned during the summer. The staff agree that efforts to establish this deeper relationship or "joining process" may possibly provide greater resources to their students. Their kickoff for this new effort will be the school's fall festival. They plan to create an opportunity for the staff and families to get to know one another on a more personal level in order to foster common understandings on which they can build productive relationships.

During previous fall festivals, each class organized a game in order to raise money for the school's library. For this year's festival, they will continue this effort and add a new dimension—making meaningful connections between family and school staff. Each class will again host a game to raise funds for the library, and Ms. López will work with teachers to set up two information booths that all families will be asked to visit while at the festival:

- In the first booth, **High Stakes Hut**, teachers will offer family members the opportunity to work sample test items from the state-mandated tests that students take and explore teacher-prepared informational brochures on the state's accountability system. A large number of staff members will be asked to rotate working in this booth so that, instead of having one

person lecturing to parents, staff members can form small discussion groups at tables. Staff will provide each person with a brochure that explains specific aspects of the state's system that parents would need or want to know about such as how to review grade levels and expectations for testing, yearly school report cards, and the importance of attendance.

- In the **What Do You Remember?** booth, each person will be greeted by a staff member who will explain that the purpose of the booth is to collect the stories from students, school staff, and family members about their experiences in school. The greeter will explain that the teaching staff feel it is important that they know more about their students and the students' families in order to meet their needs, and they also want the students and families to know more about the teachers as well. Each person will be asked to share a story that relates to their educational experience and will be given the opportunity to participate in a project to place the stories on the school's Web site. A local news reporter has agreed to write a feature article for the local newspaper; therefore, she will sit in on these sessions and take notes.

A few days after the event, Ms. López talks to the staff to see if the festival had been successful as a first step in relationship building. The teachers who worked the What Do You Remember? booth admit that they are astounded by what they had learned about the families of the students. One teacher, who has been sending notes home with a child about the child's failure to write down assignments from the whiteboard, describes how the parents of this child have never seen whiteboards before they visited their child's classroom earlier in the week. Another parent had talked about how she and her siblings had practiced their writing on the dirt of their "porch" as children. This family was very enthusiastic about providing its children with opportunities they didn't have. The father of another student drove a cab in the city but had once been an attorney and had attended prestigious schools. The teachers had assumed that the parents of the students were all poorly educated. The teachers who had talked with family members in the High Stakes Hut were surprised at the things the family members had not known. The teachers had thought that everyone in the entire state understood what the state was requiring of schools. No matter which booth they worked, all the teachers learned something new about the students' families.

The next week Ms. López invites a few parents to eat lunch with her at school to gauge their experience in the process. The family members are eager to learn about the accountability system. One parent states that she did not realize that the school lost money when the average attendance fell. She now knows that letting her daughter stay home from school hurts the school's ability to provide resources to the children. Another parent talks about how she had learned that one of the teachers is a first–generation American just as he is. Several parents are also enthusiastic about the article that the newspaper had printed about their interactions. It makes them feel as if their experiences are important. In general, the parents are excited about this first chance to exchange information with the staff.

Ms. López and her principal feel that the two information booths provided a forum for families to engage in meaningful discussion and build personal relationships among staff and families. They are very excited! However, they also know that this event is just the beginning. It will take more time and many more interactions in order for the school to foster successful family and community connections with school built on trusting relationships. It is simply a first step toward establishing the "joining process."

What to Consider

Organizing Family and Community Connections With Schools

Fostering a culture of social trust is important to building family and community involvement with schools (Henderson & Mapp, 2002; Boethel, 2003). However, there is no single best method to create this culture. As Ms. López and her principal noted, successful efforts to gain the trust of parents and assist them in learning how they can be supportive of their children's education take time and flexibility (Peña, 2000). Just as the education of children is a complex process, strategies to create purposeful interactions among staff and families are multilayered and ongoing.

The activities Ms. Lopez used at the fall festival are representative of efforts that schools can use to build meaningful relationships. These types of actions help staff to anticipate and address some of the typical reasons why family members choose not to be involved in school while also fostering a culture that encourages them to actively engage in their children's education. School leaders like Ms. Lopez should consider the common factors that impact if and how a family member chooses to become involved as they plan activities to build family connections with schools (Henderson & Mapp, 2002):

1. **Adult's definition of educational role**: What role does the parent or family member see as important and appropriate?

2. **Beliefs about appropriate methods for child rearing**: What beliefs about their role as parents foster or inhibit involvement in the child's education?

3. **Feelings about their ability to help children based on family members' skills and knowledge level, belief in their ability to teach children, and their access to other resources for needed assistance**: Do the adults believe that they have the necessary knowledge or skills to provide students with the support needed?

4. **Feelings of being welcomed and invited to the school**: Does the family member feel that the school staff are open and receptive of family involvement?

When school staff use proactive communication strategies, they help family members believe that they can contribute to the child's education, find ways to participate even though demands from work and other sources strain involvement, overcome language barriers, and ameliorate negative prior experiences.

To support this evolving relationship, school leaders will need to initiate activities that

- **help** family members feel comfortable in interacting with school staff by creating a welcoming culture,

- **assist** staff to see the value and advantages of working with family members and in redefining what "involvement in school" means,

What to Consider *Continued*

- **help** staff to see the importance of taking time to plan involvement strategies, and

- **address** barriers to family and community involvement (Henderson & Mapp, 2002; Boethel, 2003).

These strategies can lead to great family and community connections with schools and additional supports for student learning. The question for school leaders like Ms. López is, what strategies build viable relationships with students' families and the community?

Putting It Into Practice

*I*n each of the four syntheses created by SEDL's National Center for Family and Community Connections with Schools, the authors include recommendations for building effective programs that are based on the studies included. In the 2002 synthesis, *A New Wave of Evidence: The Impact of School, Family, and Community Connections on Student Achievement* (Henderson & Mapp) and the 2003 synthesis, *Diversity: Family and Community Connections with Schools* (Boethel), the authors recommend that schools promote activities that foster relationships among all stakeholders. These types of activities are common to schools that have effective family and community connections with schools programs.

This activity can be used as a first step in building relationships among schools and families as well as further defining the school's expectations for students. This activity is helpful in gathering beliefs and information from the school community on a specific topic. This process can be used to

- explore the perceptions of the school community on a given issue,

- garner support for future improvement efforts, and

- open the door for inviting family and community members to participate as partners in later efforts.

Remember this activity is a starter event; you may not feel you have accomplished a measurable outcome once it is completed. However, months later, this event will become part of a culmination of events that can lead to successful involvement. If you need information or buy-in on a topic different from the one suggested, create new questions to refocus this activity.

1 Contact a well-respected family or community member from the school neighborhood and ask that person to cofacilitate a meeting to explore expectations for the students in the community. Discussion at this meeting should focus on *What we want for our students.*	**2** Invite school staff, family members, students, and community members to attend the meeting. Be sure to take advantage of the contacts the cofacilitator has in the community.
3 Divide the participants into groups of four or five and give each group the following question to discuss *What does being educated mean to you?*	**4** Ask each group of four or five to join a second group and again discuss this question.
5 Ask the larger group what they have heard in their smaller groups. Record these answers on chart paper and post.	**6** Ask the large group if they have heard something that they would not have considered before this discussion. Record those responses on chart paper and post.

7   Ask the larger group if they heard any patterns or common threads across all of the discussions. Record these responses on chart paper and post.

8   Close the meeting.

9   Be sure to share a report communicating the key points of the responses to each question and the meeting in general with families and staff via a newsletter, Web site, newspaper story, or one-on-one contacts with families and staff.

This type of activity can provide information to a team that is beginning to explore the needs and varied perspectives of the school community. The responses of the participants will help those involved to determine long-term educational needs for the school community, what expectations the school community has for its students, and who should be involved in these efforts. Most importantly, it will help to create a feeling that the school is welcoming and interested in the experience and beliefs of all those who live and work in the school community.

For More Ideas on This Strategy:

The **Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory (NWREL)** has many resources on family and community involvement that can be used to help school staff support and engage the larger school community in school improvement efforts. In *Building Relationships for Student Success: School-Family-Community Partnerships and Student Achievement in the Northwest* (2002), Diane Dorfman and Amy Fisher draw from current research and school experiences to give teachers, parents, and administrators examples of successful partnership strategies. This document provides descriptions of successful programs and strategies that support activities on the following three themes:

- Using curriculum that makes connections between students' lives and their families and communities

- Giving families tools to support their children (such as teaching them strategies for enhancing learning at home, explaining school policies and expectations, and linking with human services organizations)

- Building mutual, respectful relationships

The examples for *building mutual, respectful relationships* can provide clear guidance to schools looking for information on how to foster relationships among all stakeholders. This document is available in print through NWREL's online catalog or may be downloaded at no cost as a PDF.

> **Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory**
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> 503-275-9500
> http://www.nwrel.org/partnerships/pubs/building.html

The **Study Circles Resource Center** is dedicated to finding ways for all kinds of people to engage in dialogue and problem solving on critical and social and political issues. Their Web site provides step-by-step guides on how to conduct dialogue on such topics as *Organizing Community-Wide Dialogue for Action and Change.* The easy-to-use processes and guidelines help participants take advantage of this powerful strategy.

> **Study Circles Resource Center**
> PO Box 203
> 697 Pomfret Street
> Pomfret, CT 06258
> 860-928-2616
> http://www.studycircles.org/

Related Research

The studies chosen for this section relate specifically to the needs of educators like Ms. López, someone who needs ideas on how to build relationships among all stakeholders.

Numerous educational studies explore this topic; however, there are also many studies in other fields, such as sociology, history, and psychology, that explore the concept of relationships. For this section, the selected educational studies include an intervention study with a randomized control trial, a comparison group design, a survey study, and a case study. While the intervention study provides the most empirical evidence on a viable strategy for building relationships, the other studies allow researchers to gather rich descriptive data that can be used to contextualize the topic. Additionally, the studies described in this section not only present current research, they also help define what is known about effective family and community connections with schools efforts.

In their comparison study of 129 high poverty elementary and corresponding control schools, Redding, Langdon, Meyer, and Sheley (2004) found a correlation between family attention to learning and student achievement. This correlation is attributed to the relationships that are established between school staff and family. They state that it is the cumulative effect of purposeful, regular, and timely interactions between teachers and families that creates a "greater reservoir of trust and respect, increased social capital for children, and a school community more supportive of each child's school success" (p. 6).

Redding, S., Langdon, J., Meyer, J., & Sheley, P. (2004). The effects of comprehensive parent engagement on student learning outcomes. Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association, San Diego, CA. http://www.gse.harvard.edu/hfrp/projects/fine/resources/research/redding.html

Musti-Rao and Cartledge (2004) studied two sets of teachers and parents in two different schools in order to determine how the collaborative approach the teachers used with the parents impacts the congruence of the teachers' and parents' perception of student achievement. They wanted to know what strategies and actions fostered meaningful family involvement in a child's education. They found that a vital element in home-school relationships was clear, consistent, and positive communication about student learning. This communication included two-way interactions about expectations, specific strategies, and outcomes of efforts.

Musti-Rao, S. & Cartledge, G. (2004). Making home an advantage in the prevention of reading failure: Strategies for collaborating with parents in urban schools. *Preventing School Failure, 48*(4), 15–21.

Comparing surveys from Chicago's top 30 high-performing schools and bottom 30 low-performing (out of 210) schools, Payne and Kaba (1999) found that the relationships that schools are able to build within and outside of the school indicate a school's viability for successful school improvement. In the high-performing schools, school staff understood and promoted the concept of relationship building on every level: staff-to-staff, staff-to-family, and staff-to-community. Within these schools, it was the relationships among the groups that fostered and promoted the collaborative efforts that resulted in shared support and responsibility for improvement. In the low-performing schools, there was limited, if any, appreciation for relationships at the schools or with the families and communities that surround the school. The lack of relationships and shared efforts appeared to inhibit or stall a cohesive or focused improvement effort. The authors determined that it was the social trust between groups and individuals that translated into capital, which in turn lead to school improvement and student achievement.

Payne, C. M., & Kaba, M. (1999). *So much reform, so little change: Building-level obstacles to urban school reform.* Working Papers Series #WP-98–26, Institute for Policy Research at Northwestern University, Evanston, IL.

Sanders (1996) identified key elements that resulted in increased school safety at the 6 schools involved in a school-family-community partnership program, designed to encourage the engagement of family and community to address this issue. Schools that used parent liaisons were able to build relationships with families through one-on-one interactions. These relationships resulted in the involvement of key individuals that contributed to increased school safety.

Sanders, M. G. (1996). School-family-community partnerships focused on school safety: The Baltimore Example. *The Journal of Negro Education, 63*(3), 369–374.

Scribner, Young, and Pendroza (1999) created case studies for 8 schools along the Texas-Mexico border that were involved in projects to increase family and community involvement. Faculty in these schools quickly determined that sending notes home with students was not a viable or successful method of communicating. Instead, they began to involve parents on committees and in information networks, made direct phone calls or visits with parents, initiated contact with family members, created parent centers, and conducted other personal interactions. They found that when schools and parents engaged in active two-way communication strategies, parents and teachers developed personal relationships that fostered a "durable structure for exchanging information" (p. 39). The result of these communication strategies was high levels of family member involvement in school improvement. In a later report of the same participants (2001), the authors state that high-performing schools serving Mexican American populations use the following strategies to support collaborative relationships with families and communities:

1. build on the cultural values of Mexican American families
2. stress personal contact with families
3. foster communication with families
4. create a warm environment for families
5. facilitate structural accommodations for parent involvement

Scribner, J. D., Young, M. D., & Pendroza, A. (1999). Building collaborative relationships with parents. In P. Reyes, J. D. Scribner & A. Paredes-Scribner (Eds.), *Lessons from high-performing Hispanic schools: Creating learning communities,* (pp. 36–60). New York, NY: Teachers College Press.

Scribner, A. P., & Scribner, J. D. (2001). High-performing schools serving Mexican American students: What they can teach us. *ERIC Digest.* (ERIC Document Reproduction Services No. ED459048).

References Cited, pages 1–4

Within this document, the descriptions of concepts and recommendations come from both long-standing foundational research as well as more current studies. The references included in this section reflect both types of literature.

Berman, P., & Chambliss, D. (2000). *Readiness of low-performing schools for comprehensive reform.* Emeryville, CA: RPP International, High Performance Learning Community Project.

Boethel, M. (2003). *Diversity: Family and community connections with schools.* Austin, TX: Southwest Educational Development Laboratory.

Cuban, L. (1988). A fundamental puzzle of school reform. *Phi Delta Kappan, 70*(5), 341–344.

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Fullan, M. G. (1993). *Change forces: Probing the depths of educational reform.* Bristol, PA: The Falmer Press.

Griffin, G. A., & Barnes, S. (1984). School change: A craft derived and research-based strategy. *Teachers College Record, 86*(1), 103–123.

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Peña, D. C. (2000). Parent involvement: Influencing factors and implications. *The Journal of Educational Research, 94*(1), 42–54. EJ615791.

Wynn, J., Meyer, S., & Richards-Schuster, K. (2000). Furthering education: The relationship of schools and other organizations. In M. C. Wang & W. L. Boyd (Eds.), *Improving results for children and families: Linking collaborative services with school reform efforts* (pp. 53–90). Greenwich, CT: Information Age Publishing.

Find Research Related to This Strategy

You can find more information and research on this topic by searching the National Center for Family and Community Connections with Schools' publications database, *The Connection Collection: School–Family–Community Publications Database*, at http://www.sedl.org/connections/resources/bibsearch.html. If you are looking for information about involvement at the secondary level, useful keywords to help narrow your search are **school-family interactions**, and **relationships**.

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