

Developing a Collaborative Team Approach to Support Family and Community Connections With Schools: What Can School Leaders Do?

By Chris Ferguson

The No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) is the most sweeping reform of federal education policy since the Elementary and Secondary Education Act was enacted as part of President Johnson's Great Society agenda. While NCLB presents state and local policymakers with an unprecedented opportunity to leverage new education reforms at their respective levels, it also challenges educators to comply with a considerable number of new and exacting federal requirements. (National Association of State Boards of Education, n.d.)

These words from the home page of the National Association of State School Boards of Education illustrate the enormity of the task that school administrators face with the NCLB legislation. Schools are now publicly accountable for the achievement of each and every child. However, an often overlooked aspect of this legislation that is intended to help support student learning is the *School-Parent Compact*.

Schools are required to involve parents in a "jointly" developed written parental involvement policy that describes

- **the school's plan to ensure that all students reach academic achievement standards,**
- **processes for staff-parent communication, and**
- **ways parents can provide and support learning.**

For many schools, the idea of involving families actively in the decision-making and implementation efforts needed for school improvement is intimidating. As can be seen in the **School Snapshot**, school leaders play a key role in creating a school culture in which parental involvement is not only accepted but also valued.

SCHOOL SNAPSHOT

Mr. Simon is the administrator of a 6–8 middle school campus located in a midsize community. The students in his school are performing adequately, but not exceptionally, on the state-mandated tests. In fact, they narrowly met their goal for Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) for the year. Knowing that he needs to develop new strategies to strengthen academic efforts to meet the school's AYP, Mr. Simon and his staff have initiated several strategies to address student performance needs:

- 1) Instructional staff meet regularly to discuss and align curriculum and instructional practices.
- 2) Staff have begun to use benchmark exams as a tool to determine if instruction has been effective.
- 3) Staff have begun a process of ongoing achievement data analysis to determine student and staff needs.

Mr. Simon feels that these efforts will help his staff assist every child in reaching academic success, but he knows he needs to include parents in this improvement process, not only as part of the mandated NCLB School-Parent Compact, but also to garner support for this work. However, he is concerned about the commitment his staff will give to activities that promote positive interactions between school staff and the families of the students.

He has just met with his instructional staff to introduce the concept of actively communicating with the students' families and inviting them to be involved in the improvement of their children's education. The meeting was rocky and tense.

SCHOOL SNAPSHOT *Continued*

His staff expressed doubts about involving families. In fact, only a few staff members were receptive to the idea of reaching out to the schools' family members. After all, at their last open house, they had only 12 family members show up. The families of their students did not seem to show their support of the school. Instead, parents often called to complain but seldom volunteered to help or support the teachers. Additionally, the staff expressed concern that if they allowed family to get "too involved," the family members would try to tell the teachers how to teach. For most of the staff, parent involvement equated to classroom interference. In general, the staff felt that the parents just needed to make sure the kids came to school prepared for learning, did their homework, and behaved well in school. His staff did not see a need for anything more.

Mr. Simon was not surprised by the concerns and fears expressed by the teachers. In fact, after reflecting on the events of meeting, he knew that airing these issues was an important step in getting his staff to engage with this new concept. However, he also knew that he needed to get his staff

past their griping and worrying and raise their awareness of the possible benefits of increased family involvement when all stakeholders come to the table in a meaningful process.

He decided to use a process called Collaborative Action Teams to help move the staff forward in their acceptance of families as partners in their children's education. In this approach, all stakeholders—school staff, students, family, and community—are involved in activities to identify pressing issues in the school community, share their perspectives on school improvement, and take action together to address those issues. This strategy will help him change his school culture from one where school staff and family interactions are devalued to one where they are common elements of the school day. As his staff becomes more accustomed to collaborative interactions, Mr. Simon plans to involve staff in exploring how family connections with schools can directly support classroom instruction and student learning. However, one thing is abundantly clear to him: a successful collaborative action team process will require multiple steps to build the relationships needed to accomplish his goals.

What to Consider

Developing a Team Approach for Family and Community Connections With Schools

Current research in this field reveals that schools, families, and communities need strong leadership if they are going to shift away from the traditional models of involvement in which school personnel dominate the interactions. When school leaders create conditions that foster collaborative relationships among the school, families, and the community, the result can be a cohesive partnership among all of the schools' stakeholders. These partnerships can harness family, community, and school resources to ensure that all students have the support needed to succeed.

A first step in beginning to initiate collaborative efforts is to define the current status of school and family relations. What factors inhibit or foster family and community interactions with the school and its staff? Successful administrators are able to anticipate the inhibitors and soften their impact while promoting research-based strategies that encourage increased involvement. The following factors have been identified in the research on family and community connections with schools as key to promoting family interactions:

- **Creating** a family-friendly school
 - *Is there a language barrier between school and family?*
 - *Are parents able to attend meetings at the times they are scheduled?*
 - *Do parents have transportation to attend events/meetings?*
 - *Do parents feel welcome at the school?*
- **Networking** through community organizations
 - *What community organizations actively support the school through service projects that impact learning?*
 - *How can these organizations help support student learning?*
 - *How can these organizations help communicate school needs?*
 - *How can these organizations help eliminate barriers to participation for family and community members?*

What to Consider *Continued*

- **Listening** actively to the concerns of individuals
 - *Do staff have the skills that are needed to be active listeners?*
 - *Are the concerns of individual parents reflective of the needs of a larger issue the school should address?*
- **Influencing** the creation of policies to encourage family and community involvement
 - *Does the district or school have policies in place that foster and promote family and community connections with schools?*
 - *What mechanisms are in place to keep policymakers aware of involvement project progress and needs?*
 - *How can school staff reach out to those who make policy in order to develop supportive policies?*

By paying careful attention to the factors that can derail or encourage family and community connections with schools, administrators can cultivate an inclusive culture that encourages the involvement of all stakeholders in school improvement.

Research also provides a list of actions that school administrators should take in order to support collaborative efforts with family and community members.

- 1. Foster formal school- and district-level policies that promote family and community connections with schools.**
- 2. Institute communication processes that reach out to family and community through multiple pathways, both informal and formal.**
- 3. Address barriers to involvement that inhibit participation because of culture or language.**
- 4. Create an environment that honors families' and community members' concerns and needs in their support of student learning.**

The question for administrators like Mr. Simon is, what actions can school leaders take as they begin these efforts?



Putting It Into Practice

Collaborative action teams (CAT) can be a powerful strategy in expanding family and community connections with schools. In a 5-year research and development project with 23 sites, SEDL (2000) found that collaborative action teams were a successful way to increase family involvement. Furthermore, Wynn, Meyer, and Richards-Schuster (2000) reviewed 249 family connections programs and found that collaborative processes were a key element in the success of family involvement efforts with schools. These researchers and others have found that it is the collaborative culture of these efforts that encourages family members to provide meaningful support for student learning. When school leaders, such as Mr. Simon, use an activity like the one described below, they are taking a first step in developing a collaborative approach to establish a “jointly” created *School-Parent Compact*.

Though educators tend to begin all improvement efforts with a visioning process, developing a deeper contextual understanding of the school’s culture can provide long-term benefits. This shared knowledge and experience about different stakeholders’ perspectives can ultimately support a visioning process done at a later date.

Again, as Mr. Simon noted, a collaborative action team process is multisteped. This activity is designed to be a foundation for future work. It is not a stand-alone activity that will instantly create a collaborative culture; it is the first of many steps that need to be taken. This activity has been modified to address the needs of a single school, rather than a district, and is taken from SEDL’s *Creating Collaborative Action Teams: Working Together for Student Success* materials, available through the SEDL catalog at <http://www.sedl.org/pubs/>. These materials are available in English and Spanish. For a copy of the original activity in PDF format, go to <http://www.sedl.org/connections/> and click on “Resources.”

Putting It Into Practice *Continued*

Gather School Community Information: Define Your School Community

A school community consists of all the people and organizations that either affect or are affected by the school. How you define *school community* will determine how the team is formed and what actions the team will take.

1 Invite representatives from various community organizations, students' family members, students, and school and district staff to attend a meeting to explore the idea of increasing family and community involvement in student success. When determining the best way to invite attendees, remember that the more representative the group is of the school's neighborhood community, the more meaningful this process will be.

2 Begin a conversation with participants by introducing the following questions to help define the school community. Record the answers on chart paper and post within sight of all attending.

- **History**

Does the school have a unique history?

How long has the school existed?

Has the student population always mirrored its present population?

- **Geography**

How is the community around the school organized physically?

Are there natural or man-made boundaries that people recognize?

Are certain neighborhoods closely affiliated with the school?

- **Administrative Organization**

How is the school administration organized?

What is the administrative structure at this school?

How are decisions made and communicated?

- **Needs**

Who are the students served by this school?

Does any sub-group of students within the school need more services or perform less well than others?

What individuals, groups, or organizations currently help meet the needs of the students in the school?

- **Common Interests**

Does the school have issues in common with other schools in the area?

Do people from different schools have overlapping interests?

How do the feeder patterns impact this school?

3 Ask the group to scan the information recorded on chart paper. Next, ask them to create summary statements about the school community based on their answers to the questions. Record the summary statements on chart paper. Post these statements for later use.

4 Create labels for chart paper with "school," "home," "community," and "student" written on them. Lead the whole group in a discussion that identifies individuals, organizations, and institutions that connect with students and their families in the school community. Record their responses under the appropriate chart labels. Ask them to keep their summary statements about the school community in mind as they do this. Sample questions to help lead this discussion might include:

- *Who has been in the media lately advocating for students and their families?*
- *Who addresses issues (before the school board, city council, etc.) concerning students and their families?*
- *Who focuses on students and their families as part of their mission?*
- *Who is most affected by the school's or district's programs and policies?*
- *Who affects the school's or district's programs the most?*

5 Divide team members into small groups of 5–7 people. Assign each group one of the summary statements that was created in the third step. Ask the small group to review the summary statement based on the discussion they had in the fourth step. Ask them to redefine the summary statement on a new sheet of chart paper. Sample questions to help foster this step might include:

- *Does this summary statement reflect the involvement of individuals, organizations, and institutions that connect with students in or out of school?*
- *Are there intersecting points of action and interest among individuals, organizations, and institutions as they work with students in or out of school?*

6 Have each group report to the whole group. Post the new summary statements and ensure that everyone agrees to them. Modifications may need to be negotiated.

Putting It Into Practice *Continued*

These summary statements describe the school community and can be used to further the process of developing a collaborative culture to support student success. Participants can take the summary statements and use them as a tool to help school staff and interested family and community members determine who needs to be involved in a collaborative action team in order to create a team that reflects the multiple perspectives inherent in a school community. This team can become the representative body that creates the written *School-Parent Compact* required by NCLB.

However, this single event cannot create a functioning collaborative action team. It is only a first step. By

continuing to engage the school, families, and the community in further activities to build a collaborative action team, the school can create a stakeholder group that can begin to address the needs of its student population. As Mr. Simon notes, it is a many-faceted process with many steps. If Mr. Simon, or other school leaders, desires to create a collaborative culture, he will need to continue to explore and promote the inclusion of a wide range of stakeholders in all school efforts in an array of activities that span an extended period of time. It is the continued work that begins with an activity such as this one that can lead to powerful interactions and bring about quality school improvement.



For More Ideas on This Strategy:

The Southwest Educational Development Laboratory (SEDL) has several products that school leaders like Mr. Simon can use to create a collaborative school culture.

The following products have been created for the National Center for Family and Community Connections with Schools, part of SEDL's current regional education laboratory contract, and may be downloaded at no cost at <http://www.sedl.org/connections/>:

1. ***Research Brief: What Do We Mean by "Family and Community Connections With Schools?" (2002)***
This research brief explores the variety of ways in which school staff, families, students, and community members define this type of involvement and provides strategies to promote these types of connections.
2. ***Learning Outside of the School Classroom: What Teachers Can Do to Involve Families in Supporting Classroom Instruction (2001)***
This strategy brief explores the concept of involving families to support classroom instruction by presenting key research findings and strategies that teachers can use to promote family involvement in supporting classroom instruction.

The following products were developed under other contracts and can be purchased through the Web site or downloaded at no cost (<http://www.sedl.org/pubs/>):

3. ***Building Support for Better Schools: Seven Steps to Engaging Hard-to-Reach Communities (2000)***
This practical guide is designed for educators, civic leaders, community organizers, or anyone else interested in involving traditionally hard-to-reach communities. Also available in Spanish.
4. ***Family and Community Involvement: Reaching Out to Diverse Populations (2000)***
This book is geared toward teachers, principals, and superintendents who want to develop meaningful parent and community involvement with culturally and linguistically diverse community members. Also available in Spanish.

Related Research

There are numerous studies that support the development of a collaborative school culture in order to foster the type of family and community connections with schools that Mr. Simon wants for his school. For Mr. Simon and other school leaders, there are two areas of family and community involvement research that can provide valuable insight into the design of meaningful efforts: leadership support and organizational structure.

Leadership Support for Family and Community Connections With Schools

Several research studies have explored leadership issues in relation to family and community involvement with a specific focus on leadership strategies that support the involvement of diverse students and their families and communities. For this topic, no random control trial studies were found. Though the studies reported here are rich in description about issues and factors influencing leadership in family and community involvement, they do not provide empirical evidence as to what leadership interventions can produce the best results or what interventions foster effective leaders for these programs.

Based on their interviews with 20 family members from Mexican-American homes and 20 family members from Anglo homes, Birch and Ferrin (2002) suggest that school leaders who promote sensitive and deliberate listening strategies can assist their staffs in reaching out to parents successfully. For example, in the study school, the staff actively engaged family members on parent advisory committees, involved them in school board sessions, and encouraged their attendance and participation at other school reform meetings. Before each meeting, a family involvement coordinator contacted family members to explain what would be expected of them at the meeting and also arranged transportation to ensure that family members could attend.

Birch, T. C., & Ferrin, S. E. (2002). Mexican American parental participation in public education in an isolated Rocky Mountain rural community. *Equity & Excellence in Education, 35*(1), 70–78. EJ646575.

Johnstone and Hiatt (1997), in an action research case study of a school-based parent center in a low-income Latino community, note that a family friendly school with an “open-door” policy that welcomes parents into the school is the strongest action in connecting families and schools. They state that the principal is the key to this open-door policy and to all efforts that encourage and support family involvement with schools. The principal, as the central advocate for a designated program, is able to marshal financial resources and to create inclusive opportunities as well as generate and enforce policy that supports these efforts.

Johnstone, T. R., & Hiatt, D. B. (1997). *Development of a school-based parent center for low income new*

immigrants. Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association, Chicago, IL. ED407156.

In their study of four successful migrant schools, Lopez, Scribner, and Mahitivanichcha (2001) found that policy decisions at all levels of the system either created or eliminated barriers to parent participation by expanding the staff’s definition of family involvement. In this study, the authors looked at two types of involvement: 1) a traditional approach that was defined as a one-sided process dominated by a school staff member requesting action on the part of a family member and 2) a more inclusive process in which staff actively sought to engage and support parents in meeting the needs of students. In cases where staff were able to shift from a traditional to more inclusive processes, family involvement resulted in positive outcomes. However, it was not just that family and community friendly policies were adopted; it was the expectation set by the policy. In these schools, the staff “held themselves accountable” for the creation of positive and successful involvement efforts. They took a proactive role through activities such as home visits. Additionally, the schools hired key staff members who had personal and unique understandings of the population groups in the community in order to bring more of the community context into the school itself.

Lopez, G. R., Scribner, J. D., & Mahitivanichcha, K. (2001). Redefining parental involvement: Lessons from high-performing migrant-impacted schools. *American Educational Research Journal, 38*(2), 253–288.

Related Research *continued*

Organizational Structures

Numerous studies have also explored the types of organizational structures school leaders use to support family and community connections with schools. For this topic, no random control trial studies were found. Though the studies reported here are rich in description about issues and factors about organizational structures and their relationship to leadership in family and community involvement, they do not provide empirical evidence as to what interventions foster the most effective organizational structures to support leaders in these programs.

From their study of 14 Spanish-speaking parents, Levine and Trickett (2000) developed a theoretical framework for collaborative school involvement processes in schools with high numbers of Hispanic and low-income families based on their finding that collaboration between school and family members was a critical aspect of successful family and community programs. For example, the authors illustrated the positive impact that can come from using translators for parents who do not speak English, offering childcare during meetings, utilizing non-school day meeting times and locations, and providing staff with professional development on the students' cultural contexts.

Levine, E. B., & Trickett, E. J. (2000). Toward a model of Latino parent advocacy for educational change. *Journal of Prevention & Intervention in the Community*, 20(1 & 2), 121–137.

Wynn, Meyer, and Richards-Shuster (2000) examined 249 “school connections” programs, tracing their origins, development, purpose, and patterns. They found that six factors significantly impact the quality of programs: motivations, relationships, organizations involved, common efforts, external influences, and results. They also found that school leaders who used innovative involvement strategies were able to create viable supports for instruction and curriculum content that came from outside the school. For example, schools in the study often drew on “guest” instructors from businesses, universities, civic associations, or art, music, or cultural organizations. Additionally, some programs were also successful in

involving tutors from a variety of community groups to support instruction.

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.

In their comparison study of the Comer and Zigler Model for School Management and Collaborative Decision-making (CoZi), Desimone, Finn-Stevenson, and Henrich (2000) studied 53 teachers and 680 third- and fourth-grade students from one school and 23 teachers and 250 third- and fourth-grade students from a population-comparable school. They found that when school systems fostered a positive atmosphere for parent involvement with schools, teachers were more apt to find meaningful ways to bring parents into the schools. For example, the participants in the CoZi group planned several events each month that involved parents that focused on addressing the child's needs at school as well as at home.

Desimone, L., Finn-Stevenson, M., & Henrich, C. (2000). Whole school reform in a low-income African American community: The effects of the CoZi Model on teachers, parents, and students. *Urban Education*, 35(3), 269–323. EJ612404.

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The National Center for Family and Community Connections with Schools is a project of the Southwest Educational Development Laboratory (SEDL).

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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," at <http://www.sedl.org/connections/resources/bibsearch.html>. If you are looking for information about involving family in learning outside of school, useful keywords to help narrow your search are **leadership**, **collaboration**, and **relationships**.



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