

Strengthening the Communities In Schools Network's Effectiveness in Increasing Family Engagement

A Robert H.B. Baldwin Fellowship Report

Doug McDurham, MSW
Executive Director,
Communities In Schools of the Heart of Texas

Strengthening the Communities In Schools Network's Effectiveness in Increasing Family Engagement

Robert H.B. Baldwin Fellow, 2006-2007

TABLE OF CONTENTS

VISION	2
INTRODUCTION.....	3
THE FOUNDATION.....	4
THE FOUNDATION.....	5
TYPES OF FAMILY ENGAGEMENT	6
TYPES OF FAMILY ENGAGEMENT	8
MEETING PARENTS WHERE THEY ARE.....	10
RETHINKING OUR APPROACH TO FAMILIES.....	11
TAKING ACTION TO STRENGTHEN FAMILY ENGAGEMENT EFFORTS.....	12
GETTING STARTED	13
ADDITIONAL RESOURCES	14
APPRECIATION	15
END NOTES.....	16

VISION

The aim of this report is to enhance Communities In Schools' capacity to help young people successfully learn, stay in school and prepare for life by championing the connection between families and schools.

This report uses the terms "parent involvement" and "family engagement" interchangeably. Both terms are generally used to refer to the process of championing the connection between the child's school, learning and education on one hand, and all of the significant adults in the child's life on the other. This broad definition covers activities as diverse as equipping parents to serve on campus leadership teams, inviting grandparents to visit school and training mentors on homework help skills. The idea that children need relationships with caring adults in order to succeed is fundamental to Communities In Schools. We believe that children will be the most successful when those caring adults understand and collaborate with their children's educational systems.

INTRODUCTION

I was hired by Communities In Schools (CIS) a few weeks before my first son was born, so in many ways, my journey as a Robert H.B. Baldwin Fellow and my journey as a parent have been parallel adventures. I have served in a number of roles during my 15½ years with Communities In Schools: caseworker, teacher, job coach, site manager, grant coordinator, executive director, state association president and national Fellow. In each role, I have witnessed the ways that the presence – or sometimes absence – of parents overshadows our work. In study after study, parent involvement is recognized to be the factor that most correlates to student achievement. For CIS to influence student achievement, we must employ the most current research and proven practices in engaging parents in their children's education.

However, I believe that engaging parents is a particularly hard task for Communities In Schools staff. Our staff serve students whose parents are the most likely to hold multiple jobs, the most distrustful of education institutions or the least likely to emphasize the importance of education. While these – and many other – factors affect their involvement, they pale in comparison to the stereotypes of the parents of the children we serve. Every parent I have met wants the best for his or her children, but in my experience, school staff often assume that many parents are not able to help their children, or worse, that they do not even care. If we are to improve student achievement, we must fight the stereotypes of parents as unavailable, unable or uncaring. We must embrace parents of the students served by CIS as partners in the education and socialization of our children.

My sons benefit from the guidance of creative and compassionate public school teachers. Nonetheless, there are times when even my high-achieving sons fall through the cracks of the complex systems designed for diverse and changing needs. My oldest son's diagnosis of dyslexia once got him bumped from an Advanced Placement course due to the faulty reasoning that "a student can't have special needs and be advanced at the same time." Parental advocacy corrected the situation, but the next day his friend and classmate faced the same dilemma. Knowing that his friend's parents spoke only Spanish, my son marched to the school office, friend in tow, and got the situation corrected. Hearing the story that night at the dinner table was a reminder that Communities In Schools students need as many advocates as possible, and that our jobs must include strengthening parents' skills as well as students' skills.

I volunteer extensively with Parents for Public Schools (PPS), a network of community-based chapters working with public school parents and other supporters to improve and strengthen local public schools. My work on the local and national levels of PPS has taught me the importance and power of including parents at the decision-making tables of education. Yet too often, when schools share power with parents, it is with parents who already have power. For CIS to make a meaningful impact on school reform, we must become experts at empowering parents to be decision-makers in their schools and school districts.

Two stories make this concept real for me. Several years ago, our local PPS chapter invited my good friend Norma to join the board. Unsure about her language skills, Norma hesitantly did so. Two years later, she was organizing groups of immigrant parents to meet with the superintendent. Likewise, my colleague Elizabeth was once a recent immigrant who wanted to know what was going on at her child's school. Her volunteer work grew into a job, and now, 15 years later, she helps coordinate after-school programs at 16 CIS sites. What Norma and Elizabeth have in common are strengths that could have easily been overlooked by schools and systems that focus on perceived liabilities. To ensure that our students and schools are successful, CIS must not overlook parents who have so much to offer.

THE FOUNDATION

What the research says about family engagement:

Communities In Schools seeks to empower students to achieve in school. As research shows that family involvement in their children's education is the single factor that most correlates to student academic success, the work of moving families' engagement to increasingly deeper levels should be a major goal of CIS. To affect student achievement in a significant way, Communities In Schools must employ the most current research and proven practices in engaging parents in their children's education. Some important findings regarding the role of family engagement in student success:

- 1) Students whose families are involved in their learning earn better grades, enroll in higher-level programs, have higher graduation rates, and are more likely to enroll in post-secondary education.
- 2) When families take an active interest in what their children are learning, students display more positive attitudes toward school and behave better both in and out of school.
- 3) Children do best if parents can play a variety of roles in their learning: helping at home, volunteering at school, planning their children's future and taking part in key decisions about the school program.
- 4) Middle and high school students whose families remain involved in these ways make better transitions, maintain the quality of their work, develop realistic plans for the future and are less likely to drop out.
- 5) Children from diverse cultural backgrounds tend to do better when families and school staff join forces to bridge the gap between home and school cultures. [1]
- 6) Conversely, a lack of parent involvement can be a predictor of dropping out. [2]
- 7) Parent involvement has the most significant impact for children who are at the greatest risk of academic failure. [3]

With such a preponderance of research findings on the impact of parent involvement on student success, Communities In Schools should be the expert on engaging the parents of at-risk students. In fact, an independent evaluation of CIS programs in Texas notes that CIS is successful in engaging parents of students at risk of dropping out, and that these parents see "positive changes in their children's attitudes towards school; attitudes and behaviors towards parents, teachers and authority figures; and work habits and course grades." [4]

What the law says about family engagement:

The parental involvement provisions in Title I, Part A of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (more commonly referred to as No Child Left Behind) require local development of parental involvement plans that address local needs. The law also requires that schools work to build parents' capacity to improve their own children's academic achievement. The specific requirements may change as federal education legislation is reauthorized or replaced, but Communities In Schools affiliates should work with the schools they serve to implement family engagement strategies. In fact, CIS can assist districts in developing parent involvement plans that are truly representative of their communities' diversity. In addition, Communities In Schools affiliates should consider how to report their family engagement activities and outcomes to their schools so that they can be included in the schools' reporting processes.

For a better understanding of federal family engagement requirements and how they can be implemented, see: Parental Involvement: Title I, Part A, Non-Regulatory Guidance, US Department of Education, April 23, 2004 (<http://www.ed.gov/programs/titleiparta/parentinvguid.doc>)

What CIS says about family engagement:

The work of Communities In Schools is based on the Five Basics, one of which is "a personal relationship with a caring adult." In addition to the role of mentors and tutors, CIS champions family engagement programs that link parents to the school as full partners, teach child-rearing skills and encourage adults to complete their education along with their children.

Dropout Risk Factors and Exemplary Programs, A Technical Report by Communities In Schools and the National Dropout Prevention Center, cites research that indicates 25 risk factors for dropping out of school. Four of these factors fall into the category of "Family Engagement":

- 1) Low educational expectations
- 2) Sibling has dropped out
- 3) Low contact with school
- 4) Lack of conversations about school

THE FOUNDATION

The report notes that family engagement strategies proven to affect dropout rates have the following elements in common:

- 1) **Support families.** Parents play an integral role in assisting student learning.
- 2) **Communicate and build trusting relationships.** Studies show that relationships are important. Parents will not participate in activities if they distrust or feel disrespected by staff.
- 3) **Hire and develop a family-focused staff.** The one strategy with the greatest impact on family involvement is designating a staff member to be responsible for engaging families. The amount of time spent on such efforts does not seem to be as important as simply having a person assigned to family engagement.
- 4) **Build linkages across individuals and organizations.** Community resources can strengthen schools and student learning. [5]

From *Dropout Risk Factors And Exemplary Programs, A Technical Report*: While analyzing the impact of a variety of factors across students' school careers on dropout, one group of researchers found that parent involvement in the 6th grade was the most important predictor of dropping out by age 19. [6]

TYPES OF FAMILY ENGAGEMENT

Too often, schools equate parent involvement with attending Parent Teacher Organization (PTO) meetings and teacher conferences, and are disappointed with the lack of involvement – especially of parents of students at risk of dropping out. School staff members given the responsibility of (but not the appropriate preparation for) promoting parent involvement often provide elaborate parent education programs and then wonder why parents do not show up. While these activities certainly hold an important place in a comprehensive family engagement strategic plan, they are not sufficient as freestanding activities.

This is where Communities In Schools can help. Well-trained school social workers, caseworkers, parent liaisons and other CIS staff members recognize that there are a variety of ways for parents to be involved in their children’s education, and that this variety needs to be taken into account for these programs to be successful. Parents of CIS students may be wary of schools for many reasons, including their own negative education experiences, a history of school contact only when there is a problem, feelings of inadequacy when dealing with professionals or a fear that institutions will report their immigration status. By understanding both the strengths and needs of parents, Communities In Schools can serve as their connection to the school and the larger education system. In the context of a caring relationship, CIS can frame parent education programs as helpful places to connect with peers, rather than a place for the school to tell parents what they are doing wrong. Trained in empowerment techniques, CIS can help parents find their voice and become decision-makers.

In *Beyond the Bake Sale: The Essential Guide to Family-School Partnerships*, Anne T. Henderson, Karen L. Mapp, Vivian R. Johnson and Don Davies outline five primary partnership methods for promoting family-school partnerships: building relationships, linking to learning, addressing differences, supporting advocacy and sharing power.

1. Build Relationships

Communities In Schools founder Bill Milliken starts his book *The Last Dropout: Stop the Epidemic!* with the heading, “It All Starts with Relationships,” and he is right. Repeatedly, I hear stories of CIS parents who are connected to their child’s school as a direct result of the relationships they have with CIS staff members. We are in a unique role to cultivate these relationships on behalf of the schools. Some structured ways that CIS can foster relationships with parents include:

- Develop a family center with materials to borrow
- Open the center to community use
- Honor families’ contributions
- Make services available to families
- Visit students’ homes

“Building Relationships” in Action

Communities In Schools of Michigan serves as their state’s Parent Information and Resource Center (PIRC). This ideal arrangement means that CIS affiliates can directly benefit from the expertise, training and resources of PIRC staff. As a result, CIS reaches out to parents through school-based family resource centers where on-site CIS coordinators welcome families and provide a variety of resources ranging from parenting support to mental health to strategies for helping children with their school work. CIS coordinators plan parent activities such as reading groups or parent/pre-schooler playgroups that reduce parents’ distrust of schools and encourage a sense of community. By building relationships, CIS is effective in engaging parents in the activities of the schools.

PIRCs are federally funded programs charged to improve student academic achievement by strengthening partnerships among parents, teachers and administrators. Every state has at least one PIRC, and they are eager to connect with community groups that support parent involvement. The Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) requires that PIRCs prioritize services that will support low-income children – a target population for CIS as well – so CIS affiliates interested in strengthening their parent engagement strategies would do well to contact their PIRC for support (see Resources).

2. Link to Learning

The direct relationship of integrated student services and academic achievement is an obvious one for seasoned CIS staff, who recognize that all of our efforts should focus on building a student's capacity to learn. Our work with parents should be no different. We do not seek to engage parents for the sake of engagement, but rather in order to help them support their child's education. Our work can facilitate this in various ways:

- Community groups can offer tutoring and homework help on campus
- Parents and teachers can review student work together
- Student work can go home each week
- Family activities can connect to learning

“Linking to Learning” in Action

Communities In Schools of Central Texas hires parent outreach workers for campuses that the Austin Independent School District has identified as their highest-needs schools. These staff members support student achievement by connecting parents to their children's learning. They begin by making home visits to help families feel welcome and connected to the school, and then serve as advocates on behalf of families to ensure that students are benefiting from all available school resources. CIS staff coordinate parenting sessions focused on the development of parenting skills and information sharing, and support and assist school personnel in providing opportunities for parents to become more involved in their children's education through open houses, family literacy nights and Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills (TAKS) test information nights. Similarly, CIS social workers are available to attend parent/teacher conferences, Admission, Review and Dismissal Hearings (ARDs) and removal hearings to help parents advocate for their children. End-of-year surveys note that CIS increased parent interest in the schools, and parents reported feeling significantly more involved and connected with their child's education.

A recent trend in the family engagement field addresses the lack of parent involvement training for educators. More teacher education programs are providing specific classroom training in the importance of engaging families as well as equipping their future teachers with the skills necessary for working with diverse parents. The Center for Parent Education and Family Support at the University of North Texas College of Education provides Parent Teacher Education Connection, an online training program for teachers who would like to improve their skills in this area (see Resources). CIS affiliates serious about family engagement reform could recommend such programs to their school administrators.

An excellent resource for linking parents to learning is the book *Family Reading Night* by Darcy Hutchins, Marsha Greenfeld and Joyce Epstein. CIS staff will find all the necessary curriculum and materials for a year's worth of family literacy activities.

3. Address Differences

Communities In Schools staff members understand the rich diversity of our communities and schools. Embracing both the rewards and challenges of this diversity helps ensure the achievement of marginalized students. We can help schools by supporting the following ideas:

- PTO includes all families
- Translators are readily available
- Diversity is acknowledged and discussed
- Professional development is offered on issues of race
- Families' cultures are represented in materials and bulletin boards

“Addressing Differences” in Action

Parents for Public Schools of San Francisco organizes Parent clubs that are language-specific, culturally relevant groups led by and for parents to support engagement in their child's education and school. Spanish and Cantonese language clubs, as well as clubs organized for black families, meet regularly for trainings, gatherings, and forums to convene community and district leaders in locations that are familiar and accessible to the community. Parent clubs, guided by parent needs, help parents connect with each other in ways that focus their unique strengths and cultural capital on behalf of local public schools.

CIS could easily borrow this simple, yet profound, concept for organizing parents who are disconnected from schools.

TYPES OF FAMILY ENGAGEMENT

4. Support Advocacy

The “give a person a fish / teach a person to fish” axiom is relevant to this discussion. Communities In Schools staff members do not have secrets for how to make things happen; they have carefully cultivated skills and relationships that can be nurtured in parents. We can do this by:

- Educating parents about options and programs
- Contacting parents to discuss student progress
- Explaining policies and procedures to parents
- Making sure that conflict resolution processes are clear

“Supporting Advocacy” in Action

Parent Walks are a good way to educate parents about the daily operations of their schools and to initiate discussion about how parents can play a role in school improvement. The 2007 Communities In Schools of Texas Principal of the Year, Jessica Hicks, coordinates parent walks at Brook Avenue Elementary in Waco, Texas in collaboration with Waco Community Development Corporation community organizer Walker Moore. Communities In Schools of the Heart of Texas provides support to help ensure the program's success. I also had the opportunity to join a parent walk at Clausell Elementary in Jackson, Mississippi. Parents for Public Schools of Greater Jackson, through the work with its partner, the Ask for More Collaborative, developed a sophisticated rubric that supports parents' capacity to observe the school culture and organize their thoughts and comments. After a preliminary meeting, parents divided into small groups and walked the halls to observe the culture of the school in action. Parents made notes on the rubric that identified nine school-culture factors, such as “teachers interacting with students,” and “friendly, courteous, and knowledgeable office staff.” Each factor had several indicators that a parent should look for in order to identify the degree to which the factor was present in the school culture. The indicators included such things as “checking for comprehension throughout the lesson” and “visitors receive directions and assistance in a friendly manner.” Principal Mitchell Shears brought in his leadership team to hear parent feedback and to answer questions at the end of the walk. His commitment to engaging parents was evident when he presented them with certificates honoring their willingness to learn and contribute to the growth of their students and school. Even better, in a follow-up conversation with Parents for Public Schools staff member Dana Larkin, I was informed that the principal and teachers made changes in the school after listening to the informed and empowered parents' observations and suggestions.

When parents understand how their schools work and what resources are available for their children, they are better equipped to advocate for the needs of their own children and the children of their community. CIS staff can create opportunities for parents to learn about their own school and the larger district.

5. Share Power

Public education is one of the most significant institutions in a democracy, and as such belongs to the citizens. A component of school reform should be to ensure that all of the “owners” of our educational institutions have a place at the decision-making table. We will know this is happening when we see:

- The PTO is focused on improving student achievement
- Families are involved in major decisions
- Staff members work with community organizers
- Parents serve on district committees

“Sharing Power” in Action

During my fellowship, I visited with members of the Logan Square Neighborhood Association (LSNA) in Chicago. The LSNA has a comprehensive education support program entitled “Opening the Schoolhouse Doors” that empowers neighborhood parents – primarily immigrants and the children of immigrants – to be involved in their neighborhood schools. I met with participants in their Grow Your Own Teachers program, a partnership with Chicago State University. Through this program, parent volunteers earn degrees in bilingual education from CSU and become teachers in their own neighborhood schools. Parents who are disconnected from their schools begin volunteering or working in low-wage jobs in the schools, and eventually become professionals in their schools. Participants reported that their increased involvement served as a model to their own children about the importance of education. In addition, the new graduates become mentors to following cohorts of Grow Your Own Teacher participants.

While this program would be costly and staff-intensive to replicate, CIS affiliates could do similar work on a smaller scale. LSNA begins by placing parents in schools as tutors and mentors, with increasing levels of responsibility over time. The LSNA then invites parents who show a long-term commitment to apply for the Grow Your Own Teacher program. Most CIS coordinators are well suited to identify and manage volunteer roles for parents of their clients. In addition, many schools hire parents or other community members as teachers' aides or for other para-professional positions. Both of these groups would be ideal for recruiting a parent or two who would be interested in becoming a teacher. Communities In Schools staff could work with their local Workforce Development Board, university financial aid office, or other appropriate groups to obtain scholarships to help the parent become a teacher. The CIS coordinators' existing role as support for students positions them well to provide ongoing emotional support for the parent. While such a project may take years of investment, the return would be phenomenal.

The Parent Leadership Institute is an intense six-day program of the Center for Parent Leadership in Lexington, Kentucky, that trains and supports parent activists to help improve achievement in their schools and to be advocates for statewide reform. It is widely recognized as the premier medium for sharing power with parents. As the program has been shown to be effective with diverse parents, the Waco, Texas, affiliates of Parents for Public Schools and Communities In Schools adopted this program as a joint project. Participants as diverse as a single mom working her way through community college and a professor in the Baylor School of Education participated, and now serve their schools and community in varied and effective ways. One graduate now writes a blog for the local paper that covers community and education issues, while another organizes student/parent events at several South Waco schools.

the first step in developing a true partnership with parents that honors their role as their child's first teacher and respects their place at the decision-making table. The ongoing goal of family involvement efforts should be to support broader and deeper levels of engagement.

We can identify success on two levels. First, can we see that a student's achievement is enhanced because of his or her parent demonstrating increased engagement in the student's learning? Second, are marginalized and disenfranchised parents gaining a genuine voice in both campus-level and district-level decision-making for their children and communities?

In a similar vein, Dr. Joyce L. Epstein, director of the Center on School, Family, and Community Partnerships at Johns Hopkins University, outlines five stages of family engagement that can help CIS affiliates ensure family engagement strategies meet the varied needs of parents with differing degrees of involvement:

1. Communicating

Design effective forms of school-to-home and home-to-school communications about school programs and children's progress.

2. Volunteering

Recruit and organize parent help and support.

3. Learning at Home

Provide information and ideas to families about how to help students at home with homework and other curriculum-related activities, decisions and planning.

4. Decision-Making

Include parents in school decisions, developing parent leaders and representatives.

5. Collaborating with the Community

Identify and integrate resources and services from the community to strengthen school programs, family practices, and student learning and development.

These frameworks for varying methods of engaging families can help Communities In Schools affiliates to focus on the true goal of parent involvement: to improve their students' grades, attendance and behavior. Parent involvement for the sake of parent involvement is not enough. Getting a parent to attend a PTO meeting is simply

MEETING PARENTS WHERE THEY ARE

A 1999 study by the National Center for Education Statistics noted that 54 percent of all teachers said they taught culturally diverse students, but that only 20 percent felt “very well prepared” to meet their needs. [8] When teachers feel unprepared for the diversity of their students, and when schools have few resources to dedicate to engaging families, it should come as no surprise that schools often resort to a dominant-culture mindset about parent involvement. When parents do not act or respond as expected, their values are questioned and the ways that they support their children's education are minimized.

In fact, the research is clear that most parents place high value on their children's education. However, various non-dominant-cultural groups may express that support in ways that school personnel either do not see or do not value. Diamond, Wang and Gomez note that shared cultural expressions increased parents' access to community resources that supported their involvement in their children's education. For example, they found that “communal child-rearing orientations among blacks allowed multiple adults to influence children's education and to reinforce parental expectations for behavior and academic achievement” [9]. Where a dominant-culture view may be dismissive of an “aunt” attending a parent-teacher conference, a strengths-based, culturally sensitive mindset would embrace the informal familial networks that wrap around and undergird our students.

Taking the time to listen to parents can go a long way in developing a true family/school partnership. In a study of Latino parents of a predominately Mexican-American school district, Toni G. Jones notes that the parents perceived low expectations for their children when teachers identified mediocre grades as being good enough, failed to communicate with parents at the secondary level and did not encourage students to pursue higher education. The parents did not believe that teachers saw their children as achievers. Further, the author saw that many teachers held a belief that parents did not value education, thus providing an excuse for the low expectations. To break this self-fulfilling cycle of low expectations/chronic underachievement, Jones recommends that parents play a role in teacher preparation by sharing their knowledge of local culture and language, as well as information about children's individual personalities and differences. [10]

Culturally sensitive communication about educational expectations is a two-way street. The research of Angela Arzubigi, Laurie MacGillivray and Robert Rueda indicates that the more knowledge a family can obtain about how schools operate, the stronger the benefit for the child. I have seen evidence of this concept in my own work with parents. When local community organizers gathered a group of Spanish-speaking, immigrant parents to discuss education issues, the parents described their principal as unwilling to accept responsibility for important decisions. Their frustration was strong and clear. It soon became evident that they perceived the principal as the final voice in school management because they recently came from schools that stood independent of larger districts. When they understood that, in their new community, principals answered to a higher authority, they realized

that the principal was not rebuffing their requests, and their trust in the individual began to grow. In addition, they began to learn how to advocate for their children in a system that many dominant-culture parents already knew how to manipulate on their children's behalf. [11]

While certainly not accurate for the larger society, a case could be made that men are not a dominant culture in school settings. Research indicates that fathers are much less likely to be engaged in their children's education, and it is not hard to see why. In addition to overcoming stereotypes of male roles, fathers often perceive schools as the domain of women. When most school leaders, staff and volunteers are women, many men struggle to find their place in the school. Brent McBride notes that many fathers are most likely to be involved in school only when there are major problems. He suggests that schools need to think more about the specific roles fathers play as parents: “We need to look at the bigger picture, because these analyses all point to the same conclusion: that men and women each contribute uniquely to child outcomes.” [12] These issues can become particularly acute in the case of non-custodial parents, a role most often filled by men.

In addition to the cultural differences and gender stereotypes that may impede family engagement, many parents experience other barriers as well. Multiple jobs, inflexible work schedules, time restraints of single-parenting, language barriers, transportation, negative experiences as a student, discomfort interacting with professionals and a history of school contact only when there are problems are all hurdles that parents may face. Communities In Schools brings sensitivity to the specific strengths and needs of diverse families, and is in a good position to fortify the connection between parents and schools.

RETHINKING OUR APPROACH TO FAMILIES

Communities In Schools should approach family engagement from a strengths-based, culture-affirming perspective. This will require staff to reflect on their own culture, beliefs, and upbringing, and identify how those factors might unconsciously shape their work with families.

Through training and dialogue, CIS affiliates can help staff expand their vision of what family involvement means by expanding the definition of “family” and the understanding of what constitutes “involvement.” To be effective with families, we must recognize and support the efforts of families to be involved both at home and through informal opportunities in other settings and contexts. Staff should acknowledge and support the multiple ways that parents nurture their children’s development outside the walls of the school. We must make efforts to communicate with and engage other interested family members and caring adults.

The National Center for Family and Community Connections with Schools at the Southwest Educational Development Laboratory identifies the concept of “The teacher as the sole expert in educating a child” as a myth that causes parents to avoid questioning educators on education issues. In fact, the parent is the child’s first teacher and knows more about the student than anyone. It is not only foolhardy, but also dismissive of the child’s best interests, to interact with the parent in any other way than as a partner in the child’s education.

Diamond, Wang and Gomez argue that true partnerships with parents can only occur if schools can focus on the potential resources that exist in families and communities rather than what is lacking in the children’s home environment. They recommend that schools:

- View parents’ involvement as a reflection of their cultural styles rather than their levels of investment in education
- Affirm the cultural capital of parents as valuable and build on it to create stronger connections between families and schools
- Recognize that school-based expectations of parents are not the only valid beliefs about the appropriate role of parents
- Build upon community-based forms of social capital that exist in minority communities [13]

Implementation of these ideas requires that CIS approach family engagement from a community organizing perspective. Rather than think of family engagement as a “service” or “program” that the school offers to parents, we must focus on our reciprocal and mutual relationship with parents. Staff should become familiar with community organizing theory and techniques, such as Mediratta and Smith’s five key tasks of community organizers:

- Work to build “people power” by recruiting members and developing their leadership skills
- Facilitate a democratic decision-making process
- Select issues based on member interest
- Use collective, direct-action strategies to accomplish goals
- Build long-term organizational power [14]

Note how these roles correlate to Epstein’s concepts of shared decision-making and collaborating with the community, as well as some of Henderson and Mapp’s partnership methods: building relationships, supporting advocacy and sharing power.

TAKING ACTION TO STRENGTHEN FAMILY ENGAGEMENT EFFORTS

A strong family engagement outreach plan will include an assessment, goals, objectives, strategies, collaborations and an evaluation.

Communities In schools excels in bringing this strategic planning approach to school-based partnerships and interventions, and should take advantage of the tools that exist to support this process. A CIS affiliate committed to this work should invest in the following three resources.

- The comprehensive third edition of *School, Family, and Community Partnerships: Your Handbook for Action* shows how to create partnership teams and train team members in planning and implementing partnership activities that support academic achievement. CIS staff will find useful information on mobilizing community resources, connecting with diverse families, evaluating results and improving efforts. The book includes a CD-ROM with forms and a PowerPoint presentation for workshops, and Spanish translations of selected resources.

Epstein et al., *School, Family, and Community Partnerships: Your Handbook for Action*, Third Edition, Corwin Press, 2009.

- Another key resource is *Beyond the Bake Sale: The Essential Guide to Family-School Partnerships*. This book contains a wealth of information and resources, including a number of practical tools, questionnaires and surveys that CIS staff can use to support quality, evidence-based family partnerships. Of particular interest are the checklists that help staff members examine their school's performance on each partnership method (building relationships, linking to learning, addressing differences, supporting advocacy and sharing power).

Henderson et al., *Beyond the Bake Sale: The Essential Guide to Family-School Partnerships*, The New Press, 2007.

- When assessing types of family engagement, most schools and CIS affiliates find that they lack higher-level partnership methods such as advocacy and sharing decision-making and power. The annual Promising Partnership Practices series provides a cross-section of the most innovative and effective family partnerships in the country. Published by the National Network of Partnership Schools at Johns Hopkins University, *Promising Partnership Practices 2008* includes one-page summaries of activities organized by partnership type and by the academic (math, science, literacy) or non-academic (behavior, college, safety) goal of the activity.

Hutchins et al., eds., *Promising Partnership Practices 2008*, National Network of Partnership Schools at Johns Hopkins University, 2008.

GETTING STARTED

While the idea of empowering parents to be shared decision-makers may be overwhelming, there are some simple and effective ways that Communities In Schools staff members can start addressing family engagement.

- The CIS critical elements of family engagement strategies include the recommendation to hire and develop family-focused staff. CIS affiliates should identify a staff member responsible for developing the capacity of CIS staff to work with families. A staff member with relevant experience and who shares parents' perspectives could do much to keep the issue of family engagement at the forefront.
- Provide child care and transportation for family events. Research indicates that doing so increases family involvement among lower-income families. [15]
- Take action to increase parents' knowledge about the school system and the importance of being involved. Parents' role in education is not static, but can change through knowledge. Research shows this to be the easiest area in which to effect change. [16]
- Create opportunities for parents to establish relationships with other parents. Family engagement strategies do not always have to be structured. Avoid the impulse to always "set the agenda" for family events; allow parents to set their own direction. People are naturally more invested in the agenda when they have more control.
- CIS staff should read the campus and district improvement plans, as well as join their campus-based decision-making committees. State and federal law generally require parent involvement in these processes. CIS can look for ways to include disengaged and non-dominant-culture parents by accompanying them to meetings, explaining the plans and advocating for their inclusion with campus leadership. CIS can obtain school support for these efforts by showing how the work helps schools meet school's Title I responsibilities.
- Identify ways to measure success. Think more about outcomes than outputs. Are parents more active? Are parent groups more diverse? Are CIS students achieving more success?

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Diversity Resources

- Collaborating with families of children with disabilities
<http://iris.peabody.vanderbilt.edu/fam/cresource.htm>
- Connecting lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender parents and schools
<http://www.familyequality.org/resources/publications/openingdoors.pdf>
- Working with fathers
http://pta.org/pta_more.asp
- Helping immigrant families navigate schools and work toward higher education
<http://tcla.gseis.ucla.edu/voices/>
- The National PTA provides various resources on parent involvement, including an overview of the National Standards for Parent/Family Involvement Programs.
www.pta.org
- The Center on School, Family, and Community Partnerships at Johns Hopkins University increases the understanding of partnership practices that help all children succeed in school.
www.csos.jhu.edu/p2000/center.htm
- The National Center for Family and Community Connections With Schools at the Southwest Educational Development Laboratory “fosters effective family and community connections with schools by developing and distributing research-based resources and tools to a wide audience.”
www.sedl.org/connections

Organizational Resources

- Parent Information and Resource Centers receive funding from the U.S. Department of Education to educate parents, family advocates, educators, community organizers and others committed to educational success for all students.
www.ed.gov/programs/pirc
- Parents for Public Schools is a national organization of community-based chapters working with public school parents and other supporters to improve and strengthen local public schools.
www.parents4publicschools.com
- The Center for Parent Leadership at the Prichard Committee brings together parents, teachers, community members and school administrators for training, information and experiences that help them work as partners to raise student achievement.
www.prichardcommittee.org
- Project Appleseed provides a self-assessment tool for parents to rate their involvement in their children's education.
www.projectappleseed.org
- The National Coalition for Parent Involvement in Education provides resources for those involved in family-school partnerships: parents or families, educators and administrators.
www.ncpie.org
- The Center for Parent Education and Family Support at the University of North Texas equips teachers to support effective family partnerships.
www.cpe.unt.edu

APPRECIATION

The Robert H.B. Baldwin Fellowship allowed me to visit with numerous leaders and activists in the family engagement field. Their work is changing the ways that schools and parents collaborate on behalf of children, and I am indebted to them for their time and wisdom.

These individuals include: former Parents for Public Schools (PPS) national executive director Ken Rolling and PPS Clearinghouse Director Jane Beach, as well as Kris Olson of PPS Waco, Texas, and Dana Larkin of PPS Jackson, Mississippi; former CIS staff member Marsha Greenfeld and Darcy J. Hutchins of the National Network of Partnership Schools at Johns Hopkins University; former CIS staff member Carole Levine and her team of professionals at the national office of PTA; Bev Raimondo of the Center for Parent Leadership of the Prichard Committee; Irv Katz of the National Human Services Assembly, along with other members of the Family Strengthening Peer Network; Dr. Arminta L. Jacobson of the Center for Parent Education at the University of North Texas; Aurelio Montemayor of the Texas Intercultural Development Research Association (IDRA) Parent Information Resource Center; former CIS of Waco executive director Catherine Jordan of SEDL's After-school, Family, and Community program; Dr. Joyce Epstein of the Center on School, Family, and Community Partnerships at Johns Hopkins University; Dr. Nancy Chavkin of the Center for Children and Families at Texas State University; and James Rodriguez of the Fathers & Families Coalition of America.

END NOTES

- 1) Henderson, A. and Mapp, K. A new wave of evidence: The impact of school, family and community connections on student achievement. Austin, TX: Southwest Educational Development Laboratory. 2002.
- 2) Jimerson et al. A prospective longitudinal study of high school dropouts examining multiple predictors across development. *Journal of School Psychology*, 38(6), 525-549. 2000.
- 3) (13) Jordan, W. J., Lara, J., & McPartland, J. M. (1994, August). Exploring
- 4) Dearing et al. Family Involvement in School and Low-Income Children's Literacy Performance. 2007.
- 5) Evaluation of Communities In Schools of Texas. ICF International. 2008.
- 6) Dropout Risk Factors and Exemplary Programs: A Technical Report. National Dropout Prevention Center and Communities In Schools, Inc. 2007.
- 7) Jimerson et al. 2000.
- 8) www.pta.org/Documents/National_Standards_Implementation_Guide_2009.pdf.
- 9) U.S. Department of Education, Office of Educational Research and Improvement. Teacher quality: A report on the preparation and qualifications of public school teachers. Washington, DC: Author. 1999.
- 10) Diamond et al., African-American and Chinese-American Parent Involvement: The Importance of Race, Class, and Culture. Harvard Family Research Project. May 2006.
- 11) Jones, Toni G. Incorporating Latino Parents' Perspectives Into Teacher Preparation. (Family Involvement Research Digest). Harvard Family Research Project. November 2002.
- 12) Arzubiaga et al., Lessons from Latina Teachers' Childhoods. (Family Involvement Research Digest). Harvard Family Research Project. November 2002.
- 13) McBride et al. The differential impact of early father and mother involvement on later student achievement. *Journal of Educational Psychology*. May 2009.
- 14) Diamond et al. May 2006.
- 15) Mediratta, K. and Smith, C. Advancing Community Organizing Practice: Lessons from Grassroots Organizations in India. Paper presented on COMM-ORG: The On-Line Conference on Community Organizing and Development. <http://comm-org.wisc.edu/papers.htm>. August 2001.
- 16) Dearing et al. (2006). Family involvement in school and low-income children's literacy performance: Longitudinal associations between and within families. *Journal of Educational Psychology*, 98, 653-664. 2006.
- 17) Chrispeels, J. and Gonz, M. Do Educational Programs Increase Parents' Practices at Home? Factors Influencing Latino Parent Involvement. Harvard Family Research Project. November 2004.

This material is based upon work supported by the Corporation for National & Community Service under Grant No. 08ERHVA001. Opinions or points of view expressed in this document are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the official position of, or a position that is endorsed by, the Corporation.

