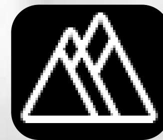
BY REQUEST...

BUILDING TRUST WITH SCHOOLS AND DIVERSE FAMILIES:
A Foundation for Lasting Partnerships



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By Request...

Building Trust With Schools and Diverse Families: A Foundation for Lasting Partnerships

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FOREWORD

This booklet is one in a series of “hot topics” reports produced by the Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory. These reports briefly address current educational concerns and issues as indicated by requests for information that come to the Laboratory from the Northwest region and beyond. Each booklet contains a discussion of research and literature pertinent to the issue, how Northwest schools and programs are addressing the issue, selected resources, and contact information.

One objective of the series is to foster a sense of community and connection among educators. Another is to increase awareness of current education-related themes and concerns. Each booklet gives practitioners a glimpse of how fellow educators from around the Northwest are addressing issues, overcoming obstacles, and attaining success. The goal of the series is to give educators current, reliable, and useful information on topics that are important to them.

INTRODUCTION

> Students will need more than just good teachers and smaller class sizes to meet the challenges of tomorrow. For students to get the most out of school, we need to promote a partnership between parents, community leaders, and teachers ... Only through partnerships can our schools keep improving and stay on the right track.
>
> —Susan Castillo, Oregon Superintendent of Public Instruction, *Daily Astorian*, June 12, 2003

During the past several decades, the benefits of parents' and other family members' involvement in children's education have been well-documented. Although it isn't the only factor in improving student learning, 30 years of research has consistently linked family involvement to higher student achievement, better attitudes toward school, lower dropout rates, and increased community support for education, as well as many other positive outcomes for students, families, and schools (Henderson & Mapp, 2002). When families are involved in learning, the research shows, "students achieve more, regardless of socioeconomic status, ethnic/racial background, or the parents' education level" (Antunez, 2000).

Despite these findings, many schools struggle to actively engage high numbers of parents and other family members in children's schooling. Of those families who do get involved, the majority are white and middle income, typically those whose home culture most closely matches the norms, values, and cultural assumptions reflected in the school. Minority, lower-income, and families who speak limited English, on

the other hand, are often highly underrepresented in school-level decisionmaking and in family involvement activities—a phenomenon that speaks far more often to differing needs, values, and levels of trust than it does to families' lack of interest or unwillingness to get involved (Antunez, 2000; Goddard, Tschannen-Moran, & Hoy, 2001; Trumbull, Rothstein-Fisch, Greenfield, & Quiroz, 2001; Young, 1998).

This booklet examines issues of trust and family involvement, focusing specifically on relationships between diverse families and schools. After providing a brief introduction to three core concepts—trust, culture, and family involvement—we offer a summary of relevant research and a discussion of common obstacles to school-family partnerships. Tips for reaching out to diverse families, profiles of several current family involvement efforts in Northwest schools, and additional resources are provided at the end.

IN CONTEXT: FAMILY INVOLVEMENT AND NO CHILD LEFT BEHIND

"In the best of all possible worlds," write Adams and Christenson (2000), "the family-school relationship would be based not only on two-way communication, cooperation, and coordination, but also on collaboration" (p. 478). The 2001 reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), No Child Left Behind (NCLB), signals a move in that direction. The inclusion of several new provisions related to family involvement reflect the gradual shift in U.S. educational policy and practice from viewing parents as important players to full partners in the formal education of their child.

The new provisions under NCLB, particularly those under Titles I and III, expand schools' obligations to inform parents and to reach out to families who have traditionally been underrepresented in school activities and decisionmaking, such as parents of English language learners. Schools that receive Title III funding, for example, are required to:

> implement an effective means of outreach to parents of limited English proficient children to inform such parents of how they can—(A) be involved in the education of their children; and (B) be active participants in assisting their children—(i) to learn English; (ii) to achieve at high levels in core academic subjects; and (iii) to meet the same challenging State academic content and student academic achievement standards as all children are expected to meet (Title III, 3302 (e) cited in Gomez & Greenough, 2002, p. 4).

Past provisions of the ESEA related to family involvement, "such as school-parent compacts, parental involvement policies, and the parental involvement funding formula," also remain in effect (Gomez & Greenough, 2002, p. 1). In short, NCLB establishes that:

- Parents have the right to be informed of the content and quality of their children's education
- Parents have the right and responsibility to participate in decisionmaking and learning at the school
- Parents have the right to make educational choices in the best interest of their children*

Although the legislation provides guidelines and provisions for schools to follow as they develop family involvement policies, schools may also face challenges in complying with the law, especially in how to strengthen relationships with families whose needs and concerns have not been addressed. Clearly, if families and schools are to form partnerships that work, there must first be a foundation of mutual trust, confidence, and respect. The goal of this booklet is to provide some starting points for schools to address these challenges.

*For the full text of Title I and III guidelines see the NCLB Web site at www.ed.gov/nclb/overview/intro/progsum/index.html

CORE CONCEPTS: TRUST, CULTURE, AND FAMILY INVOLVEMENT

Although most of us have a general understanding of terms like "trust," "culture," and "family involvement," articulating precisely what they mean can be difficult. A working definition of each term, along with a brief introduction, is offered below.

Trust

Drawing on their comprehensive review of the literature on trust, Hoy and Tschannen-Moran (2003) offer the following definition:

> Trust is an individual's or group's willingness to be vulnerable to another party based on the confidence that the latter party is benevolent, reliable, competent, honest, and open. (p. 189).

Trustworthiness, then, is typically judged according to these five main facets:

1. **Benevolence:** The degree to which the other party takes your best interests to heart and acts to protect them

2. **Reliability:** The extent to which you can depend upon another party to come through for you, to act consistently, and to follow through

3. **Competence:** Belief in the other party's ability to perform the tasks required by his or her position

4. Honesty: The degree to which the other person or institution demonstrates integrity, represents situations fairly, and speaks truthfully to others

5. Openness: The extent to which the other party welcomes communication and shares information with the people it affects

If families are to trust teachers and other school staff members, in other words, they must believe that school personnel are qualified, fair, and dependable, and have their child's best interests at heart (Adams & Christenson, 2000; Bryk & Schneider, 2002; Young, 1998). In most cases, such trust is built over time, based on sustained interactions between the parties in question. "In the absence of prior contact," Bryk and Schneider (2002) assert, families and educators "may rely on the general reputation of the other and also on commonalities of race, gender, age, religion, or upbringing" to assess a new person's trustworthiness. The more parties interact over time, however, the more their willingness to trust one another is based upon the other party's actions and their perceptions of one another's intentions, competence, and integrity.

Culture

Another slippery term, culture can be defined as

> a way of life, especially as it relates to the socially transmitted habits, customs, traditions, and beliefs that characterize a particular group of people at a particular time. It includes the behaviors, actions, practices, attitudes, norms and values, communications (language), patterns, traits, etiquette, spirituality, concepts of health and healing, superstitions, and institutions of a racial, ethnic, religious, or social group. It is the lens through which we look at the world (Edwards, Ellis, Ko, Saifer, & Stuczynski, in press, p. 11).

Particularly for members of a majority cultural group, it may be difficult to identify certain values and norms of behavior as being connected to cultural background. As Ahearn et al. (2002) remark, "Our own culture is often hidden from us, and we frequently describe it as 'the way things are'" (p. 5).

One model commonly used as an entry point into discussions about cultural differences places cultural groups along a continuum from highly individualist to highly collectivist. More individualistic cultures place higher value on "individual fulfillment and choice," according to this framework, while cultures that are more collectivist place greater emphasis on "interdependent relations, social responsibility, and the well-being of the group" (Trumbull et al., 2001, p. 4). As these authors note in *Bridging Cultures Between Home and School: A Guide for Teachers*,

> These two orientations of individualism and collectivism guide rather different developmental scripts for children and for schooling; and conflicts between them are reflected daily in U.S. classrooms. Keener awareness of how they shape goals and behaviors can enable teachers and parents to interpret each other's expectations better and work together more harmoniously on behalf of students (p. 6).

For example, if schools are aware that in more collectivist communities extended family members regularly and naturally take on parenting and mentoring roles with children, then

schools can work to develop relationships with all community members who are concerned about their children's well-being.

As Trumbull et al. (2001) stress, being aware that different cultural orientations exist is extremely valuable in developing programs, policies, and activities that build on the strengths and values of a diverse school community. However, it is important not to overgeneralize or to use general information about different cultural groups to make assumptions about individual students and their families:

> Members of the same culture vary widely in their beliefs and actions.... We all have unique identities that we develop within our cultures, but these identities are not fixed or static. This is the reason that stereotypes do not hold up: no two individuals from any culture are exactly alike.... Because individual differences within cultural groups are far greater than differences between cultural groups, it is both particularly crucial and particularly challenging to operationalize understandings of culture and avoid stereotyping in diverse classrooms (Ahearn et al., 2002, pp. 8–9).

Getting to know students and their family members as individuals, participating in social activities in the community, visiting families at home, and asking parents to share their views are all good ways for educators to broaden their understanding of family and cultural diversity.

Family Involvement

Also referred to as parent involvement, school-family collaboration, and school-family partnerships, family involvement refers to a wide range of activities through which parents, grandparents, older siblings, tribal members, and other members of students' extended family contribute to and support student learning. Under the widely-used framework developed by Joyce Epstein (Epstein, 1995; Epstein et al., 1997), there are six main categories of involvement: parenting, communicating with schools, volunteering at school, supporting learning at home, participating in school governance and decisionmaking, and taking part in school-community collaborations, such as adult literacy classes or tutorial services. In this model, providing a quiet study environment for students at home, expressing value for learning, setting high expectations, helping with homework assignments, chaperoning school events, attending parenting classes, and serving on the school board are all considered valuable contributions to students' learning.

Epstein's framework suggests many different ways for families to be involved in children's education, and also challenges schools to engage in practices that reach out to diverse families. Trumbull et al. (2001) note, however, that schools may not always apply the framework in ways that reflect the needs, values, and abilities of diverse families. For example, schools that offer parenting instruction may not recognize cultural differences in child-rearing practices. Similarly, some parents may not possess the time or the skills to assist children with schoolwork at home; others come from cultures in which schooling is considered to be strictly the teacher's responsibility. If schools are to be successful in engaging diverse families, Trumbull and others argue, they will need to reevaluate traditional models of involvement and include families in discussions of how they would most like to be involved (Mapp, 2002; Trumbull et al., 2001; Voltz, 1994). To be effective, involvement efforts must become more collaborative, more inclusive, and more culturally relevant (Gomez & Greenough, 2002).

WHAT THE RESEARCH SAYS

In their comprehensive review of 51 recent, high-quality studies* on family involvement, *A New Wave of Evidence: The Impact of School, Family, and Community Connections on Student Achievement*, Henderson and Mapp (2002) highlight the following key findings on partnerships between families and schools:

1. Students with involved parents, regardless of family income and background, are more likely to:

- Earn higher grades and test scores, and enroll in higher-level programs
- Be promoted, pass their classes, and earn credits
- Attend school regularly
- Have better social skills, show improved behavior, and adapt well to school
- Graduate and go on to postsecondary education (p. 7).

2. Family and community involvement that is linked to student learning has a greater effect on achievement than more general forms of involvement. To be effective, the form of involvement should be focused on improving achievement and be designed to engage families and students in developing specific knowledge and skills (p. 38).

3. Schools that succeed in engaging families from very diverse backgrounds share three key practices. They:

- Focus on building trusting, collaborative relationships among teachers, families, and community members
- Recognize, respect, and address families' needs, as well as class and cultural differences
- Embrace a philosophy of partnership where power and responsibility are shared (p. 7).

As the above findings suggest, trust and relationship-building are recurrent themes in discussions of family involvement. Until recently, however, trust in particular has received far less attention in the research than have other aspects of family involvement. Few studies have focused specifically on the role of trust in relationships between schools and families; fewer still have considered ways in which issues of race, class, culture, home language, family involvement, and trust intersect. Difficult to define, trust is even more difficult to measure, let alone link causally to family involvement or other outcomes for students, families, and schools. Three current, large-scale studies that have taken the issue on are described below:

- Goddard, Tschannen-Moran, and Hoy's (2001) study of 47 elementary schools in a large urban school district in the Midwest resulted in two major findings related to relationships between families and schools: one, that student achievement is higher in schools where teachers report greater trust; and two, that "poverty more than ethnicity

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*Studies selected for inclusion in *A New Wave of Evidence* (2002) were reviewed to meet the following standards: "1. Sound methodology: experimental, quasi-experimental, or correlational design with statistical controls. For qualitative studies, such as case studies [the authors] looked for sound theory, objective observation, and thorough design. 2. Study findings that matched the data collected and conclusions that were consistent with the findings" (Henderson & Mapp, 2002, p. 13). For more information about these studies, a database of more than 200 articles, and more research on family involvement see the Southwest Educational Development Laboratory Web site at http://www.sedl.org/work/family.html

seems to be the culprit" in hindering trust in urban schools (p. 15). In examining levels of trust among teachers, parents, and students, the researchers concluded that "trust is systematically associated with student socioeconomic status—the larger the proportion of poor students in the school, the lower teachers' perceptions of trust" (p. 13). Further, they found that

> even after controlling for the effects of the proportion of low-income students in a school as a whole, trust still plays an important role in student achievement. In fact, the amount of trust teachers have in students and in parents outweighs the effects of poverty.... Trust seems to foster a context that supports student achievement, even in the face of poverty (p. 14).

- In their 10-year study of more than 400 Chicago elementary schools, Bryk and Schneider (2002) concluded that trust among teachers, principals, students, and parents is a strong predictor of student and school success. Schools with higher levels of trust are more likely to successfully implement and sustain reforms, while those with low levels of trust stand little chance of making significant gains. According to the researchers, schools demonstrating high levels of teacher-family and teacher-principal trust generally possess the following characteristics: they have a stable population; there are minimal "racial and ethnic tensions" among students, parents, and staff; and educators are able to provide parents with clear evidence "that students are learning" (p. 97).

- Adams and Christenson's (2000) survey of 1,234 parents and 209 teachers in a large suburban school district found that both teachers and parents believed that improving home-school communication was a "primary way to enhance trust in the family-school relationship" (p. 491). They also found that the kinds of interactions parents and teachers had were better predictors of trust than was the frequency of interactions. Additionally, family-school trust "correlated significantly with three indicators of school performance for high school students: credits earned, grade point average, and attendance (p. 491).

Although there are few studies on trust to date, these and other sources (listed in the References) provide us with an understanding of why trust is so important in building relationships and suggest ways in which schools can build trust.

OBSTACLES TO TRUST: BARRIERS TO STRONG FAMILY-SCHOOL RELATIONSHIPS

A common misperception about families who aren't actively involved at school is that they simply "'don't care' about their children's education" (Mapp, 2002, p. 7). Educators who see the same small group of families helping out in the classroom, attending school events, and participating in school governance, for example, may conclude that the others in the district are not interested or do not place high value on education. In fact, most families do care a great deal about their children's education. Although white, higher-income families tend to be more visible in many schools, the vast majority—in all ethnic, linguistic, and socioeconomic groups—support their children's learning at home in a variety of different ways (Henderson & Mapp, 2002; Mapp, 2002). Further, studies of immigrant Latino, African American, and other underrepresented family groups have repeatedly found that they are "highly interested" in being more directly involved (Trumbull et al., 2001, p. 32).

Rather than assuming families are unwilling to become more active partners with schools, educators would do well to examine closely the specific causes of poor school-family relationships and low levels of involvement in their community. By examining these barriers, schools can begin to develop solutions for gaining support and trust. Some common obstacles:

Bad first impressions. The way parents and other family members are received the first time they come to the school can set the tone for the duration of their relationship.

Families who feel ignored or slighted by the adults in the building are unlikely to come back, especially if they had been hesitant to come to the school in the first place.

Poor communication. Whether it is miscommunication, or a lack of communication on the part of both families and schools, these issues can create tension and distrust.

Past experiences. Family members' prior experiences with school also have a significant impact on how willing they are to trust school staff members and become involved in their children's schooling (Antunez, 2000; Mapp, 2002). Family members whose own experiences were negative may not feel comfortable entering the school building, or may not trust that teachers will value their input. Similarly, families who have encountered problems with another teacher or with another school their child attended may question the value of communicating with schools at all. Teachers, too, who have had previous negative experiences with families may question the value of communicating with others.

Family members' lack of self-confidence. Some may not believe that they are capable of contributing to their children's education (Antunez, 2000; Onikama, Hammond, & Koki, 1998); others find school personnel intimidating and fear looking incompetent if they ask teachers questions about how to help. Families may doubt that they have anything to offer by participating in the classroom, working with their children on schoolwork at home, or serving on school decisionmaking teams (Trumbull et al., 2001).

Teachers' lack of confidence. An equally powerful barrier to developing strong relationships with families is teachers' lack of confidence. According to Hoover-Dempsey,

Bassler, and Brissie (1987), "a teacher's belief in his or her own teaching effectiveness is the strongest predictor of successful parental involvement" (cited in Onikama, Hammond, & Koki, 1998, p. 7). Newer teachers, in particular, may fear being viewed as incompetent by family members, and thus initially avoid contact with them. New and veteran teachers alike may also doubt their ability to involve families effectively (Onikama, Hammond, & Koki, 1998). Until recently, few teacher education programs offered training on working with families as partners in their children's education. Even fewer addressed strategies for collaborating with families from diverse cultural, linguistic, and socioeconomic backgrounds.

History of discrimination. Past and present acts of discrimination—whether they occurred in school or in the larger community—remain a major barrier to family involvement and trust in schools (Antunez, 2000). As Onikama, Hammond, and Koki (1998) emphasize, "It is difficult for families to want to become involved with institutions that they perceive are 'owned' by a culture that discriminated against them in the past" (p. 5). It should come as no surprise that Native families, for example, are often hesitant to trust public schools:

> In American Indian and Alaska Native communities formal education has often been imposed upon people in a degrading and destructive manner. In fact, the early efforts at education on the part of the American government and religious groups were aimed at eliminating Native cultures, languages, and traditions. Clearly, this has not left a good impression of mainstream education among many Native peoples (Meadow et al., n.d., p. 14).

Differing expectations of parent-teacher roles. Recent immigrants to the United States may have little knowledge of the public school system, much less a particular district's expectations regarding family involvement in their child's education. They may also hold very different beliefs about the roles of teachers and parents than those assumed at school (Trumbull et al., 2001). As Antunez (2000) notes,

> In some cultures ... teaming with the school is not a tradition. Education has been historically perceived as the responsibility of the schools, and family intervention is viewed as interference with what trained professionals are supposed to do.

Families from such cultures may believe that their role is to raise "respectful, well-behaved human beings" and leave the academic instruction to schools (Trumbull et al., 2001, p. 39).

Lack of confidence in the school. Finally, and perhaps most important, families' doubts about school effectiveness, teacher competence, and the integrity of school leaders are prime causes of mistrust and unwillingness to engage in activities related to the school. Family members who raise concerns about a problem at school and fail to see any action taken may see no reason to continue interacting with the staff. Persistent problems, such as low test scores or repeated incidents of violence and discrimination, may lead some to conclude that educators simply aren't doing their job. As many districts have seen, negative news coverage can exacerbate this problem, especially if it is the only source of information families and other community members receive about teachers, school leaders, and school performance.

LAYING THE FOUNDATION: BUILDING TRUST BETWEEN FAMILIES AND SCHOOLS

A critical first step in engaging diverse families, then, is to focus on building relationships of mutual trust, confidence, and respect. As Henderson and Mapp (2002) emphasize, "When outreach efforts reflect a sincere desire to engage parents and community members as partners in children's education, the studies show that they respond positively" (p. 66). Some places to begin:

Assess the level of trust in the school community. Selecting an assessment tool is a good place to start (for some examples, see the Resources section). Discuss perceptions of current school-family relationships with teachers, administrators, students, parents, and other family members; identify specific barriers to trust in your community; and solicit input from all parties on ways to address them.

Actively welcome students and families. Letting families know that they are welcome in the school building, greeting them when they arrive, and posting signs in their native language are just a few ways to communicate to parents that they are valued members of the school community. Hiring administrative staff who speak the same language as families is another way to not only welcome bilingual families, but to provide them with someone who can act as an interpreter. Providing a Family Resource Center, as will be discussed in the following section, is another way to demonstrate that families are welcome at school. Parents and other family members are also more likely to trust that the school values their involvement when they see people who share their cultural and linguistic background among the school staff.

Begin relationships on a positive note. Adams and Christenson (2000) remark that oftentimes,

> the only time parents have contact with the school is in crisis situations such as when the student has violated school regulations. ...with no previous contact ... these situations often lead to nontrusting interactions and, subsequently, non-optimal results for the student. A previous time in which to signal trusting intentions is considered an essential prerequisite for handling critical issues for students (p. 482).

Teachers whose first contacts with family members are positive—notes or phone calls about something good the student did in class, for example—demonstrate to families that the school is interested in and values their child.

Highlight school successes. Families cannot be expected to place trust in schools and teachers about whom they know very little. Identify ways to communicate with parents and other family members about student accomplishments, professional development efforts, and other school programs that reflect the school's commitment to quality teaching and learning.

Improve school-family communication. Too often, school-home communication is only one-way, with schools determining what information parents need and sending it to them. Opening up more and better ways for families to communicate with schools, listening to what they say, and responding seriously are essential to trust-building (Adams & Christenson, 2000). "Make sure that you convey the message to parents that their input is considered valuable" (Voltz, 1994, p. 290).

Demonstrate that you care. Knowing that principals, teachers, and other school staff have their children's best interests at heart is critical to families developing trust in schools (Goddard, Tschannen-Moran, and Hoy, 2001). Even small things, such as learning a few words in a families' native language, make a difference.

Show respect for all families. Voltz (1994) advises educators to use titles, such as Mr., Ms., or Mrs., when addressing parents, unless they tell you otherwise: "Although the use of first names in some cultures may be viewed as a means of establishing a collegial, friendly relationship, in other cultures, it is viewed as disrespectful or forward" (Voltz, 1994, p. 290). Using "a tone of voice that expresses courtesy and respect" is also important.

Treat parents as individuals. "Resist the stereotyping of parents based on race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, or any other characteristic. Recognize the diversity that occurs within cultural groups, as well as that which occurs between them" (Voltz, 1994, p. 290).

Be open with parents. As Voltz (1994) advises, "Don't ignore or dodge tough issues" (p. 290). Making information easily accessible to families, providing it in language they can understand, and ensuring that they know who to talk to if they have questions is a good place to start in demonstrating openness.

Take parents' concerns seriously. Listen, respond, and follow through. Depending on the situation, consider inviting families to help generate solutions. Be sure that they know what is being done to address their concerns.

Promote professionalism and strong teaching. To build strong family-school trust, families must view the school principal, teachers, and other personnel as competent, honest, and reliable. Failure to remove staff members who are widely viewed to be racist or ineffective, according to Bryk and Schneider (2002), quickly leads to low levels of trust in the school and its leadership.

Remember that trust-building takes time. Families whose past encounters with the school or community have been negative may have no reason to expect things will be different now. Rebuilding trust takes time and a serious commitment to establishing strong relationships.

> When a school initiates and implements programs, policies, and procedures with the express intention of seriously meeting the needs of the students, then the school can begin to develop an environment in which the community can begin to rightfully place trust in the local school and its staff (Young, 1998, p. 18).

NEXT STEPS: STRATEGIES FOR ENGAGING ALL FAMILIES

As the level of trust in a school increases, teachers, family members, and administrators not only become more willing to work together, but develop higher expectations for success. There is still much that can be done, however, to make opportunities for involvement more meaningful and more accessible to all. Listed below are a number of strategies suggested by practitioners, researchers, and parents for engaging families with diverse backgrounds, interests, and needs:

Collaborate with families on ways to be involved. In many schools, staff members have traditionally been responsible for establishing

> the nature of the relationship between themselves and parents. If parents feel uncomfortable with the school's conceptualization of family involvement, they may be inclined to abstain from any of the 'menu items' made available by school personnel (Voltz, 1994, p. 290).

Communicating with families and asking them how they would like to be involved and how the school can facilitate that is an essential part of developing true family-school collaborations.

Provide family members with opportunities to develop participation skills. "If ethnically diverse parents feel they lack the knowledge and competence to operate within the bureaucratic structure of the school, they may involve themselves at lower levels or not at all" (Young, 1998, p. 16). Programs such as the Parent Effectiveness Leadership Training (discussed in the Northwest Sampler) can be helpful for families to understand their rights, responsibilities, and roles in the education system, and develop their leadership and communication skills.

Express high expectations for family-school partnerships. "Teacher expectations can affect teacher-family interactions in the same way that teacher expectations can affect student-teacher interactions" (Voltz, 1994, p. 289). It is up to schools to make genuine efforts to reach out to families and assure them their contributions are valued.

Communicate with families in person. In some cultures, notes sent home from the school are regarded as too impersonal and may not be interpreted as genuine invitations for parents to participate. Visiting families in their home at times that are convenient for them may be a better way to reach out.

Recognize diverse family structures. "School personnel often regard mothers as the primary caregivers in the family, and therefore direct most communications about a child's school performance to his or her mother. Under these circumstances, paternal involvement may not be encouraged, and fathers may even receive messages implying that it is not welcomed" (Onikama, Hammond, & Koki, 1998, p. 6). Don't overlook other adults in students' lives—grandparents, older siblings, tribal leaders, and so on—who play a central role in their upbringing (Voltz, 1994).

Create a family resource center in the school. Family resource centers

> should be centrally located in the school, conveying the message that families are valued partners in education. Ideally, centers should be equipped with kitchens and bathrooms, soft furniture, resource information in many languages, telephone and computer access, and toys for small children. When the center welcomes the whole family—including children of all ages—parents or grandparents can access the resources available to them more easily. Even more important, making the whole family welcome displays the school's respect for the family as a unit (Trumbull et al., 2001, pp. 43).

Make school events more accessible to families. Providing transportation and childcare may make participation in school events possible for a number of family members who were not previously able to attend. Holding events in other places in the community that parents frequent and where they feel more comfortable is another way to encourage participation (Sosa, 1997). It may also be necessary to offer events at different times of the day or week to reach all families.

Don't let language be a barrier. As Antunez (2000) writes, "Inability to understand the language of the school is a major deterrent to the parents who have not achieved full English proficiency. In these cases, interactions with the schools are difficult, and, therefore, practically nonexistent." There is much that schools can do to prevent language from blocking families' involvement with the school, from hiring bilingual

staff members to connecting parents with others in the community, as discussed below. Whenever possible, schools should avoid asking children to translate for their parents, as this may do more to make parents uncomfortable than to aid in communication.

Build connections between families who speak the same language. Connecting recent immigrants to other members of the school community who speak their language and are more familiar with the school may be especially valuable, particularly for families with few other connections in the area. Families may also feel more comfortable attending school events if they know that other people they recognize and can communicate with easily will be there.

Provide opportunities for meaningful involvement. Studies have shown that family members are generally more interested in activities that are directly connected to their child. Volunteering at a school fundraiser, for example, may be seen as less valuable to some families than receiving information on how to work with their child at home on reading or math. Further, families need to know what purpose activities serve and how they relate to overall goals.

Design assignments that build on families' "funds of knowledge." Families offer a wealth of knowledge that can contribute to the curriculum. One teacher, for example, identified construction work as a topic with which many of her students' families had experience. She then developed a series of assignments in which students researched and wrote about construction work, built model buildings, and gave oral reports on their projects. "By the end of the semester, 20 parents and community people had visited [the] class

and shared their knowledge with her students" (NCREL, 1994). Other schools, such as Heritage Elementary in Oregon, have developed projects in which children interview their families about their culture in the classroom, and the families teach the students dances and songs. (see the Northwest Sampler for more about this project).

Provide staff training on working with families. As noted earlier in the booklet, many teachers have had little experience or training on ways to engage students' families. Others may feel intimidated by parents or worry that involving parents more directly in the classroom will be a waste of time. School leaders may need to jumpstart a schoolwide family involvement initiative by providing professional development on school-family collaboration, intercultural communication, connections between culture and learning, or other topics specific to involving diverse families more directly in students' education (Trumbull et al., 2001).

Consider ways to involve and build relationships with family members of high school students. "As students move to secondary schools, parents and students are faced with the challenge of communicating and building relationships with several teachers" (Adams & Christenson, 2000, pp. 491–492). Teachers who have more than 100 students find it increasingly challenging to build relationships with all their students' families. Under these circumstances, a school can develop relationships in such ways as inviting families to participate in activities such as student mentoring, career days, senior projects, and fundraisers. Sending short but frequent notes by e-mail to families also helps to keep the school in touch with families on a regular basis.

CONCLUSION

To be certain, there is no set recipe for increasing trust in a school or for developing stronger relationships between families, students, principals, and teachers. As Young (1998) writes,

> Each individual school, in cooperation with the community in which it serves, must reflect on its current educational program and its relationship with the community in which it is embedded. Based on this self-reflection, the school and the community must jointly determine which strategies are likely to be the most effective in creating a sense of trust...(p. 17).

Making a commitment to building partnerships with diverse families, as the schools profiled in the following Northwest Sampler demonstrate, is a good place to start.

NORTHWEST SAMPLER

The following pages describe ways that schools, districts, and parent groups throughout the Northwest have built trusting school-family relationships that have led to greater family participation. Though the strategies and programs may differ in design and purpose, each seeks to partner with families in different ways. Included for each description is contact information, and tips directly from educators and parents to others looking to implement similar strategies in their schools.

Location

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Parent Mentors Create Bridge Between Schools and Bilingual Families

Fairbanks North Star Borough School District has a diverse student body—60 languages are spoken in 33 schools. Almost 10 percent of the borough's population is Alaska Native; 8 percent of students are English language learners.

The Parent Mentor Program provides new parents with a parent mentor who speaks their language and orients them to the school building and staff. One of the main functions of the parent mentor is to check in with new families on a weekly basis and see how things are going. When families cannot be reached by phone, the mentors visit their homes. If there is an attendance problem, for example, parent mentors tell families that they miss the child and ask if there is anything they can do to help. Parent mentors provide positive, welcoming outreach services in many other ways, as

well: they are on hand to welcome families as they drop off and pick up their children from school; they meet children as they get off the bus; they send out greeting cards, invitations to meetings, and other communications to bilingual families; they call absentee children; and they participate in meetings and conferences as interpreters. The duties and function of mentors vary depending on the school and the structure the principal creates. One principal has created a structure for the mentor and specific tasks like keeping a journal and keeping track of parent contacts. A parent resource specialist coordinates the program and helps the mentors with any concerns and questions.

Nancy Castillo, a parent resource specialist at James B. Ryan Middle School, emphasizes to mentors the importance of taking the time to build trust. "When I oriented the parent mentors to the role, I told them that the most important thing they can do is to treat families like I treat you—with respect." A simple thing Castillo and all the mentors do is make communications personal—either by handwriting notes on printed flyers, making phone calls, or paying home visits. "The children love to see us in their own communities," Castillo says.

Carmen Fernandez, a Spanish-speaking parent mentor, discusses one of the breakthroughs she had with a parent on one of her home visits. "The first two times we visited her home, we talked through the door, because the mother was ashamed that she didn't have furniture. A third time, she invited us in for coffee and we talked about how important it is for her son to be in school. From that day on, she has come to school every day to make sure her son is there. She also makes sure his homework is in on time."

Fernandez said this incident really made her realize the impact that talking directly with a family can have. Yelena Linse, a parent mentor who speaks Russian, talks about how thankful a Russian parent was when Linse contacted her and started speaking her native language. She had many questions and Linse was able to provide her with a list of helpful agencies. Linse even offered to go with the parent to help.

Family communication always begins as positive and welcoming, so that if there is a problem down the road that needs to be communicated, a positive relationship between the mentor and family has already been established. Parents are encouraged to contact mentors if they have questions or concerns throughout the year. Mentors also encourage other parents to volunteer at the school. Sometimes mentors watch other parents' children in the parent resource room while those parents volunteer.

Lucy Glora, who was a Spanish-speaking parent mentor, was recently hired to be the bilingual secretary for the district's Title III office. She explains that she was motivated to become a parent mentor because she remembers how it felt to be new to the district and to be frustrated that the teachers could not speak her language. "Now I want to help other families who don't speak English—I understand how they feel."

Mary Mathis, another Spanish-speaking parent mentor, explains that her most important role is to put families at ease and orient them to the school. One of the first things she does for new families is to introduce them to the teachers and principal. "I say to the families, I am here to help you, interpret for you, and if I can't help you, I will find another staff person who can." Mathis also makes phone calls home

to families on teachers' behalf, to invite them to a school function, for example. "This works better that just sending a flier home, which could get lost." Mathis also encourages families to help their children as much as they can with learning. She offers some suggestions to school staff members on how they can be more welcoming to families who don't speak English:

- Make sure that families can visit the school at times that are convenient for them.
- Be aware that your body language and facial expressions are important to parents' first impressions of the school.
- Your smile as they come through the door will put them more at ease in a potentially intimidating environment.
- Introduce new families to the principal.

Although the program was at first funded by Title I money, now it is funded primarily from Title III (limited English proficient) dollars and a Development and Implementation Grant, so parent mentors work at both Title I and non–Title I schools. Because of budget cuts, parent mentors this year work fewer than 20 hours a week. Although the parent mentors provide orientations to all new families in the district, there are only some schools that have mentors, so they are very busy. In previous years, parent mentors were trained to be certified translators and regularly translated enrollment forms and family communications into several languages. Because No Child Left Behind stipulates that districts implement an effective means of outreach to parents of limited English proficient children and provide information such as individual achievement on state assessments in an "understandable format," these parent mentors serve a very important purpose. Now, the state is attempting to have uniform

statewide forms translated into at least 15 languages, so mentors can spend their time doing more outreach activities.

"One challenge to this program," says Sipe, "has been finding parents who are bilingual, willing to work less than 15 hours a week, and feel comfortable with the school environment themselves, and who are able to take a leadership role to be able to help others who feel less comfortable and intimidated."

Family Workshops

In addition to the parent mentor program, the grant also funds workshops for families to assist in providing educational enrichment at home. The workshops are open to all parents, but families that have children in the ELL program are specifically invited.

The district has offered many workshops for parents: family math, math games, Raising Your Child Bilingual, and Make and Take workshops. The Make and Take workshops have been especially successful in engaging parents. Teachers from around the district demonstrate an activity they can use at home. After the demonstrations, teachers go around to centers and help families create a learning tool. Some examples of activities last year were:

- Bean bag toss math game in which the families sewed their own bean bags and put numbers 0–9 on 10 plastic cups that are held together with popsicle sticks

- Tactile phonics board for preschool and kindergarten children created with colored hair gel, zippered plastic bags, and squarecut cardboard

- Electroboards that can be used for almost any content with tag board, electrical wire, brass fasteners, and continuity testers that light up when the correct connection is made

- Laminated graphic organizers that are blank on one side and have examples on the other side, so that kids can fill them in with dry erase markers and wipe them off when they are finished

- Portfolios for children to collect and organize their best school work with stickers and colored papers to decorate them

- Flip chute made with a milk carton that kids decorated to use when they are working with flash cards

Shannon Sinclair, the Title III Staff Development Coordinator says that mailing out flyers, the usual avenue to get families involved in workshops, wasn't working. "We tried a couple different things, such as having workshops at a school rather than the district office, and providing workshops for the whole family, rather than just parents." Sending translated invitations to families, posting flyers at schools, and having parent mentors and ELL tutor instructors give flyers to families are other strategies that have worked to increase attendance.

As families began to attend the workshops more frequently, they were asked to fill out a needs assessment to find out how workshops could be made more useful and how to encourage more families to attend. From these results, the days of the workshops were adjusted, and continued to offer activities for children while parents were learning, or activities that families could do together. Another important finding of the survey, says Sinclair, was to be sure to include food at the workshops!

Location

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Accomplishing Cultural Diversity Through Family Reading

University Park is in the Fairbanks North Star Borough School District. It is a very diverse school; of 250 K–6 students, 66 percent are Caucasian, 20 percent Alaska Native, and the others include many other cultural groups, including Asians and Latinos/Latinas. Although many students live in the city, many other students live in outlying rural areas.

A project that has been very successful in bringing together families of all cultures to participate in their children's reading is the Accomplishing Cultural Diversity Through Reading project. The first-grade teachers put together a grant "in a day" to operate a weekend reading program that focuses on multicultural reading, in which families read books together.

In January of the last two years, the first-grade teachers have had a pajama party to kick off the program. Children come

in their pajamas with family members and can bring a blanket and a favorite stuffed animal. After a presentation to introduce the program and talk about the books, the children can select a book, cuddle up in the library with their parents, and begin reading. The second year of the grant, the teachers added a presentation that included parents teaching dances and songs from such different cultures as Yup'ik and Korean.

The expectation for the program is that the child will choose a book for the weekend, read the book with their family at home, and the parent and child will complete a reading log to record their comments about the book, and what they learned. Scholastic Books has a list of multicultural books from which the teachers ordered 50 books per classroom.

"We got wonderful feedback," says first-grade teacher Jeannie Nelson. "The parents wanted to read more books about Alaska Native culture, and we were able to order these books from Scholastic the following year. The books stimulated much conversation between parent and child, many families identified with things in the book, and the books also enabled families to become more enlightened about different cultures."

This project, coordinated and planned by the first-grade teachers, is just one example of how University Park is partnering with families, but one that is most rewarding. "This has been the highlight of my career," exclaims Nelson.

Location

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Using Language and Culture To Create Family Connections

Heritage is located in the small downtown area of Woodburn, Oregon, halfway between Portland and Salem. The town has been traditionally rural and agriculturally based, although the economy is diversifying to include small businesses such as an outlet store mall. Of the school's 686 K–5 students, 57 percent speak Spanish as their native language, 30 percent speak Russian, and 12 percent speak English. The Russian families are from two cultural backgrounds—recent immigrants and Old Believers, who have lived in Woodburn since the 1950s, and speak an older Russian dialect. This diversity has created wonderful opportunities for teachers to incorporate home culture and language into the school culture.

At Heritage Elementary families are involved in their children's learning activities inside and outside the classroom. Staff members are using research-based recommended

strategies to engage families of all backgrounds. As the research mentioned earlier indicates, family involvement activities linked to specific knowledge and skill goals have a greater effect on student achievement than more general activities, and engaging families from diverse cultures requires a respect and attention to cultural differences. Heritage Elementary does both.

Schoolwide Family Involvement Plan

Heritage's School Council, which has several family members, developed the schoolwide plan in which each student performance expectation and academic goal area is tied to a family involvement component. For example, to meet the academic goal area—"Improve English proficiency of English Language learners"— a parent focus group is held to explain the school's English transition program. To ensure that families know how well their children are meeting these goals, they receive achievement data for each goal area.

The plan also focuses on the continuous improvement and evaluation of family involvement strategies. Principal Kathy Larson knows how important it is to continually reassess the level of parent involvement and to assess whether certain strategies are creating enough opportunities for families to get the information they want, and enough opportunities for them to participate in their children's learning. For the past several years, the faculty has hosted parent information nights, with the information presented in their home language. While this was effective in bringing many parents into the school, says Larson, over the years fewer and fewer families attended these meetings, and there was little feedback on whether the meetings were helpful, and how they could be better.

Family Focus Groups

To determine what information they needed, families were surveyed in the spring of 2002, and focus groups were created to answer families' questions. A schedule was created for the 2003–2004 year, in which focus groups on these specific topics are held. Four focus groups are planned for the year, along with a back-to-school night in September, and a family arts night in June. During the focus groups, the participants have the opportunity to ask questions, and break into language groups to work on the same learning activities that their children do in school. This is so families will be able to help their child with the activities at home.

Support of Native Language Development

One reason for families' high level of interest in participating in family focus groups and other activities is the school's support of native language development and retention. The English Transition Program places students who score low on English language assessments in classes where initial instruction is in their native language (Spanish or Russian). As students progress through each grade, they gradually receive decreased instruction in the native language and more instruction using sheltered English techniques. In first grade, 80 percent of instruction is in the native language and by fifth grade students are receiving 50 percent in their native language. The goal is for students who exit the program after fifth grade to be as proficient in English as their peers who are native English speakers. Students spend homeroom periods together so they have the opportunity to speak English with others and meet children outside their language group. Teachers and parents say this is effective for

accelerating language development and gives "students a feeling of being more integrated in the entire school."

Class Projects Involving Families

Along with language, family and community culture is incorporated into the classroom in a variety of meaningful ways, and families are encouraged to be teaching partners on projects and standards-based activities.

Spanish language kindergarten teacher Evelyn Kiraly uses a project that bridges learning goals, language, culture, and families. The goal of her Value Your Language project is to connect activities that develop reading, writing, and oral language skills with the student's cultural background. Another goal is for children to conduct interviews, a component of the schoolwide inquiry study. Families receive a work plan about the project and are invited to participate by the teacher and children. Kiraly explains what the family's contribution will be in a letter that accompanies the project.

Each week students take home a cultural/fairy tale book from the library. At home they follow a chart that suggests an activity for each day to do with their family that would interact with the book. For example, for reading strategies they answer who, what, where, when, and why questions about the story. An adult must sign each activity after they are completed. Using a book called Classroom Interviews by Paula Rogovin (1998) as a guide, the children conducted interviews with their parents at the school to find out more information about their family origin. The children and teacher wrote the questions they wanted to ask and practiced techniques through role play.

Family members come to the classroom on different days and share stories, music, recipes, games, history of their native culture, and books that they create with their child at home. Says Kiraly, "The children recognize how parents can teach them like real teachers."

The project culminates with a celebration to which parents are invited. "Last year this was the most exciting part of the project for everyone. A few parents took a real interest in preparing for the final presentation," remarked Kiraly. One father taught students a poem about moms called "El so de Mayo," and a mother taught a dance called "la Raspa." The boys dressed up in white trousers and hats, and the girls dressed up in identical flowery skirts.

Kiraly believes that this project is successful because parents and the teacher work together to identify meaningful writing, reading, and oral learning experiences that were built on cultural and language values of Spanish-speaking families, with full family involvement. Principal Larson indicates that other classes will be using certain aspects of the project, such as using interviews as a fulcrum for inquiry-based learning and having parents be teachers in the home and in the classroom. Says Larson, "A great benefit for the kids is that they realized their parents are a wealth of information about their culture."

Conclusion

The focus on standards-based education that incorporates native language development, culture, and family partnerships has shown results. In 2001 Heritage Elementary was named one of the nation's exemplary bilingual education programs in

a study by the Intercultural Development Research Association (Montecel & Cortez, 2001). IDRA rigorously and methodically studied Heritage and nine other exemplary bilingual programs across the nation as determined by limited English proficient students' academic achievement. The study identified 25 common characteristics that contributed to the high performance of these students. Parent involvement is one of the indicators of success for bilingual programs.

IDRA notes in its profile of Heritage Elementary School that the "integration of community culture and school lifestyle makes an enormous impression on the parents and stimulates them to contribute to their children's school and become involved in their children's success." A Russian parent who was interviewed for the study said that children are motivated to learn Russian so they can speak to their non-English speaking grandparents, and that they are not embarrassed to be speaking Russian because they use it at home. The report also concludes that the high level of family involvement is crucial to the school's success, even as many families have migrant lifestyles. Russian and Hispanic families have said that "volunteering is second only in importance to the teacher's involvement in assuring the success of the program" (Montecel & Cortez, 2001).

Tips for Success

Larson shared with us several tips for her success in involving families:

◆ Ask yourself when developing activities, "What is the purpose for this parent activity?" Tie your activities in with goals for student learning or another outcome.

◆ Use multiple ways of communication. Find out what medium parents prefer to use. Many in our community use cable-access television. We can videotape focus group meetings and put them on cable to provide information to a greater number of families. Also, don't assume that certain families will not have a computer (and find out who does).

◆ Provide all teachers with means to communicate with families including e-mail access and a phone.

◆ Be aware of time challenges and try to develop solutions to such problems as how teachers will be compensated for their time at parent focus groups, and how scheduling conflicts can be solved so more parents can attend the groups.

◆ Recognize that families can participate in projects in different ways, and involve families as much as they can be involved. For example, if a family member is hesitant about being interviewed, you might suggest a less intimidating location or have them bring along another family member.

Location

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Trusting Relationships Create Foundation for School Improvement

The principal and staff of Warm Springs Elementary have years of experience working with their community to guide them in creating partnerships with families. Located on the Warm Springs Reservation, 20 miles from Madras on the eastern side of Mt. Hood, the school has educated generations of families from the reservation. Ninety-eight percent of the children are Native American, descended from one of three tribes—the Wasco, Paiute, and Warm Springs people—that were settled on the 644,000-acre reservation by a 19th-century government treaty.

Achievement is increasing among students, and the school has a welcoming, caring, and trusting culture; most teachers have stayed for more than 10 years, and the children feel safe and secure. This culture was not always so welcoming, however. Before Dawn Smith became principal in 1994, faculty turnover was very high. Families were not able to build relationships with teachers who quit every year. Academic achievement was also low; 70 percent of students were below

grade level. "The school used to be more isolated from the community," Smith, a teacher at the time, remembers, "and if parents came to the school, it was for a negative reason, such as for disciplinary issues. This put parents on the defensive, and we are working hard to overcome these issues still."

Smith and her staff's dedication to ensuring that all the children succeed has caused test scores to rise dramatically in the last few years. In 2002–2003, close to 70 percent of all students (and Native American students as a group) met state standards in English/language arts and 60 percent in math—the target was 40 percent for language arts and 39 percent for math. Warm Springs achieved Adequate Yearly Progress in all areas but one: attendance, which was 91 percent (92 percent needed to reach the target). There are various reasons for the lower attendance, explains Smith, but the reality is that families need to travel long distances during the day to do business and to obtain basic medical, financial, and other services, and often need to take their children with them.

Smith has redoubled efforts to increase attendance beyond the 92 percent. She knows involving families is crucial. "What doesn't work," she says, "is to send home an official letter outlining the consequences." Instead, she and her staff talk with the families and/or send personal letters home that express their concern that students will fall behind if they don't attend school. "We tell parents that their most important role is to get their children to school," Smith adds. Positive publicity for increasing attendance numbers is another strategy. They are posted everywhere in the small community, at the post office, tribal center, and grocery store, and at the school's front entrance. The school's Web site has a running banner that tells the attendance for each day,

and the monthly attendance (for September 2003 it was 94 percent).

Smith expects the families to be partners with the school to ensure the children achieve state standards. She explains to the families what the school's improvement goals are and provides them with copies of the standards and of test results, and explains how activities they do are tied to each standard. "They have to know everything the staff does," she says. "We ask families, how can you help with our goals?" Examples of activities to assist families with meeting the goals are the "Accelerated Reading Nights," during which families take the tests alongside their children.

First- and second-grade teacher Angie David has been at Warm Springs for 10 years, beginning her first year of teaching here, the same year Smith started as principal. She became interested in the position because Smith challenged her at a job fair to "only come back and talk with me if you are serious about teaching here for five years." David admits to being taken aback at first by such directness, but was intrigued and motivated to interview and teach at Warm Springs because of Smith's high expectations for both the children and staff. Now, 10 years later, David is very involved and a part of the community (she laughs, "I married a tribal member, how much more involved can you get?").

David focuses on building trusting relationships at the beginning of the school year. She writes a letter to each family during the first three weeks, and adds a personal note about each student. She makes as many phone calls as she can the first month, especially to let families know about accomplishments, such as doing well in a spelling bee.

"Then, when I need the family's help to help students, I have already established a good relationship."

David and Smith offer some tips for creating positive, trusting relationships:

- Encourage staff members to be active in the community. "Most of our teachers live off the reservation, because of limited housing, so they try to adjust their schedule to get involved in community celebrations," says Smith. "We also keep the school open longer in the evening for teachers and families to meet."
- Learn as much as you can about the cultures of your students. Families will remember that you had the interest and respect for them to do this. Also, show your respect and support for family members by attending community gatherings, especially funerals.
- Make communication personal with handwritten notes and phone calls. Teachers need to make positive contact with families, so when they must communicate something negative, there is already a relationship built between teacher and family.
- Families love it when you memorize their names—this tells them that you are a person to be trusted.
- At family conferences, keep a positive focus on the child. It is best to not sit across the table from the parent, which can set up an intimidating relationship. It is also helpful to understand that for many, direct eye contact may be intimidating.

- Give families time to talk about their children—don't talk at them too much.
- Looping the first and second grade, so that students have the same teacher for their first two years, has worked to build a close relationship between families and teachers.

Smith sums up her philosophy on building trust in this way: "I think it all goes back to that well-worn and very true educational saying, 'Parents really don't care how much you know until they know how much you care.' Also, it's good to remember that parent involvement can take many different forms, it doesn't necessarily mean the physical presence of the parent in the school. Parents who can't make it in to school can, and most often do, support school efforts by reading at home at night, making sure their children are in school rested and well, and reinforcing school expectations every morning before their child leaves for school. As school staff, you may never see them, but you experience the results of their involvement daily."

"Once you have the family's support," David concludes, "you really have it, and they'll support you in any way they can."

Location

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Parents for African American Students

Bellevue is a large urban district located 10 miles east of Seattle, Washington. The district has 15,207 students, and is diverse culturally, ethnically, and linguistically, with Asian students 21 percent of the student body, African Americans 3 percent, Hispanic students 8 percent, and white students 68 percent.

Bellevue School District offers families many opportunities to partner with individual schools. Says Newport High School's Principal Patty Siegwarth: "We work diligently to engage all our students and parents in the educational process. We invite parents to gatherings using invitations written in their native language and have interpreters available." Each school has a PTSA as part of the districtwide PTSA, and Newport High School has the Program Delivery Council—a decisionmaking body of families, teachers, students, and the principal. Some schools hold family forums at which family members can ask administrators questions about the curriculum.

A unique family-initiated district group is the Parents for African American Students. This grass-roots organization formed when Rose Mayfield, a parent and employee in the district, brought some concerns to the attention of the new district superintendent. Many of these concerns had to do with the perceived lack of communication about important matters or events being conveyed to families of color. The superintendent asked if other families had the same concerns, and did the families network? "Because African-American families especially are few and spread out in the various schools, we had not at that point done much networking," says Mayfield. With the superintendent's support, several parents formed a group to begin networking between families, so that they could share information, and voice concerns collectively. About 30–50 families were invited to an initial meeting to share their concerns. The superintendent asked if he could attend the meeting, and the group agreed. "This was a very emotional meeting for the families," remembers Mayfield. "The superintendent was very receptive to us, and we were able to fill him in on the history of the families' concerns with the district."

After the meeting, a group of parents presented the superintendent with a list of their concerns. Although not all concerns have been resolved, the group members decided that they would do what they could to work on particular concerns. At the moment, the group is looking at ways to encourage students to stay in school, graduate, and consider higher education. One way to do this, they felt would be to have a fundraiser to provide money for college scholarships. The group partnered with several other parent groups in the district to do this. This kind of partnering, says Mayfield, worked really well because all the small groups could pool their resources.

The Parents for African American Students have also planned more networking social events for families, and especially for the children and young adults, who don't often see each other since they are spread throughout the district. An evening was planned where families played board games together; former students were invited to visit. "It was an amazing event," says Mayfield. "We plan to do more such events, such as movie nights a few times a month. We want to create an opportunity for families and students to connect."

Although the group was asked to join the district's PTSA, Mayfield explains that they declined the invitation because they wanted to address their own concerns first. In the past, explains Mayfield, "some of us didn't feel the PTSA needed us." This does, however, leave the door open for future collaboration between the groups for the advancement of all children in the district. Mayfield is very excited about the progress so far. "At first, our idea for the purpose of the group was to share information between us. If we could do just that much, it would be great; if we could do more, it would be even better."

SELECTED RESOURCES

National Network of Partnership Schools
http://www.csos.jhu.edu/p2000/default.htm
The National Network of Partnership Schools brings together schools, districts, and states that are committed to developing and maintaining comprehensive programs of school-family-community partnerships. Network members use an Action Team approach to organize partnership program development. Teachers, administrators, parents, community members, and students work together to design and implement partnership activities that meet goals for student success. The Network has many resources for building school-family-community partnerships, including the latest research and guidebooks.

NWREL Resources

School-Family-Community Partnerships Team Resources
www.nwrel.org/partnerships/index.html
The School-Family-Community Partnerships team develops and disseminates resources for schools in the region on a variety of related topics, and can provide training on the listed publications or individualized staff development and technical assistance on selected topics tailored to meet the school's identified needs on a fee-for-service basis. These publications are written for various audiences (such as early childhood care providers; elementary, middle, and high school staff; parents; and community members). These products include three major resource and training manuals, as well as supplementary booklets. For more information on how the School-Family-Community Partnerships Team can help, contact 503-275-9487 or partnerships@nwrel.org

Planning for Youth Success (2001) is a manual and guide that provides a positive way for members of a school community (school staff, students, families, and community members) to form or strengthen partnerships that will help to ensure success for their youth. The process outlined in the manual enables school community members to ask themselves, "What do we have to build on?" and then helps them to design a project based on those strengths with support from the community's existing resources and assets. Available at www.nwrel.org/partnerships/pubs/pfys-pdf.html

Partnerships by Design: Cultivating Effective and Meaningful School-Family-Community Partnerships (2002) is a guide to help schools and programs assess their current approaches to involving families and community members, and to assist them in implementing more effective strategies. Available at

www.nwrel.org/partnerships/cloak/booklet-one.pdf or by e-mailing products@nwrel.org

Building Relationships for Student Success: School-Family-Community Partnerships and Student Achievement in the Northwest (2002) draws from current research and school experiences to give teachers, parents, and administrators examples of successful partnership strategies. Teachers, parents, and staff at six high-poverty, high-minority schools were interviewed to provide their perspective on what research-based methods look like in practice. Available at www.nwrel.org/partnerships/cloak/booklet2.pdf or by e-mailing products@nwrel.org

Classroom to Community and Back is a practitioner's guide to strategies that draw on the knowledge, skills, experiences, and culture of family and community members to meet academic standards and enhance learning for all students. The guide focuses on how educators can tap into the culture of the students' family and community in ways that enrich teaching and learning, increase their relevance to students, and engage the entire community. This, in turn, will improve partnerships, first, by creating a standards-based curriculum that brings family and community culture into the classroom and the school in meaningful ways and, second, by improving family and community partnerships to support educational experiences outside the school. *Classroom to Community and Back* is currently undergoing a pilot study and is expected to be published in 2005.

The School-Family-Community Partnerships Team provides training in conjunction with the listed publications, including in-depth institutes as well as workshops. For more information call (503) 275-9487 or partnerships@nwrel.org

Family Involvement and Beyond: School-Based Child and Family Support Programs (1999) is a discussion of research on resiliency, attachment theory, culturally responsive teaching, school reform, and characteristics of school-based child and family support programs, along with descriptions of Northwest schools. The book includes handouts and a self-assessment tool for creating family-friendly schools. Available to order by e-mailing products@nwrel.org

Supporting Parent, Family, and Community Involvement in Your School (2000) provides ideas for schools to create a comprehensive plan involving families and the community. It provides an assessment instrument based on Epstein's six types of involvement to measure how your school is reaching out to parents. Available online at www.nwrel.org/csrdp/family.pdf

Parent Effectiveness Leadership Training (PELT)

Contact information for certified PELT training
NWREL's Equity Center
503-275-9603

PELT is a training program designed to provide families with the leadership skills to successfully access their children's school system. The program is based on concepts of Dr. Tony Clarke of the Washington Urban League, who designed leadership training for African American families in Tacoma, Washington. Sara Vega-Evans, Sunnyside (WA) School District's parent involvement coordinator, modified and updated the concept to meet the needs of all parents regardless of ethnicity. PELT's goal is to increase the overall involvement of parents who have traditionally not been involved. One reason parents may not be involved is because they are uncomfortable with making their needs known and communicating with school staff. The topics in six interactive workshops (conducted in the participants' language) focus on discovering leadership skills, goal setting and decisionmaking, effective communication, parent rights and responsibilities, and celebrating learning.

The workshops impress upon parents that they are the most important leaders in their child's life, more important than teachers. The participants do role plays to practice leadership in certain situations such as this one:

> When you visit your child's school, you must check in at the office. As you stand by the office counter waiting to be assisted, you notice two or three adults joking and talking. No one offers to help you. You feel ignored. What should you do?

After the role play, the trainer leads the group in applauding the actors for having the courage to perform in front of everyone. Each session ends with "Thorns and Roses": participants can voice negative statements (thorns) and what they enjoyed or learned (roses).

"PELT is an enriching process that provides parents with an opportunity to evaluate the role they play in their children's education. The training is very engaging, exciting, and challenging at the same time," said Kendra Hughes, a certified PELT trainer and Equity Associate at NWREL.

Last year, 15 Spanish-speaking parents from Beacon Hill Elementary School in Seattle graduated from the school's first PELT session. Masako Davison, an ESL teacher who helped write the grant to fund the training program, explains that the goal was to have more Hispanic families involved in the decisionmaking process at the school. After the training, the participants continued to meet monthly, and worked to encourage other families to get involved.

The PELT training was very successful in empowering the families not only to participate in their children's learning, but also to be involved in decisionmaking. "Before the training, the families were afraid to come to school," says Chilo Granizo, a Spanish-bilingual instructional assistant. "Now they ask—what can we do?" adds Davison.

The families have formed a PTA subcommittee and, for the first time, a Hispanic family member is the PTA co-chair. The group held their first fundraiser, making more than $1,000 selling Krispy Kreme doughnuts, and recruiting 20 other family members to help. "This was the first time many

of these parents spoke in front of people," says Davison. "It was very empowering for them."

The impact of the PELT training on the families and children shouldn't be underestimated. Davison and Granizo see that the parents have the confidence to take active roles in the PTA and in the classroom with their newfound confidence and leadership skills. "We can really see that the children are doing much better than last year with the families involved in a morning reading group, and the families come into their children's classes every day and read with them, holding their hand," says Granizo.

For additional information about Beacon Hill, call Masako Davison or Chilo Granizo, at 206-252-2700.

Southwest Educational Development Laboratory's Resources

SEDL's family-community efforts and resources prompted the U.S. Department of Education to award funding to the Regional Educational Laboratory to operate the National Center for Family and Community Connections with Schools. The center creates bridges between research and practice, linking people with research-based information and resources that they can use to effectively connect schools, families, and communities. The center reviews emerging findings and research to develop an online database, annual conferences, and annual reports to help advance procedural knowledge and provides training and networking across the REL system to link research findings to practice.

Connection Collection is an online database of 270 abstracts of journal articles, books, reports, conference papers and proceedings, and literature reviews related to school-family-community connections (www.sedl.org/connections/resources/bibsearch.html)

A New Wave of Evidence: The Impact of School, Family, and Community Connections on Student Achievement (2002) examines the growing evidence that family and community connections with schools make a difference in student success. This and other research syntheses are available at www.sedl.org/connections/research-syntheses.html

Creating Collaborative Action Teams: Working Together for Student Success (2003) is a set of concepts, activities, and resources that individuals, school districts and other

organizations can use to develop a partnership between home, school, community, and students at the local level. These teams identify pressing issues in the school community and take action to address them. For more information, see www.sedl.org/pubs/fam18/ and www.sedl.org/prep/cats/

Building Support for Better Schools: Seven Steps to Engaging Hard-to-Reach Communities (2000) is a practical guide designed for educators, civic leaders, community organizers, or anyone else interested in involving traditionally hard-to-reach communities. It offers advice on getting to know your community, identifying issues important to the community, and designating and training facilitators. Available online at www.sedl.org/pubs/family27/building_support.pdf

For more information about these and other resources SEDL has to offer, contact info@sedl.org and 800-476-6861

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