Discussion of public school reform draws attention to a typically overlooked essential of academic success: family and community engagement. Any serious reform cannot ignore authentic family/school/community engagement as an essential ingredient, according to a seven-year study by researchers at the University of Chicago who looked into some 200 “turnaround” schools efforts and outcomes in the Windy City. In fact, the Chicago study found that only 10 percent of the turnaround schools without solid family and community engagement (or one of four other identified essentials) realized academic improvement (Bryk, Sebring, et. al., 2010).

Too often, school leaders have paid lip service to the notion of family and community engagement. That option no longer exists. “Parents have a profound impact on student achievement, so engaging them should be as important to your school’s mission as improving instruction,” writes Nora Carr, chief of staff for North Carolina’s Guilford County Schools, in the March 2011 *American School Board Journal*. She reports that top scholars know that when it comes to student achievement, “non-school factors outweigh ones controlled by educators by a two-to-one margin” and that a 2006 National Assessment of Education Progress study showed a “30-point difference in scale scores between students with involved parents and those without” (Carr, 2011).

Such findings really are not new. In a review of some 50 studies of family engagement and student achievement, researchers a decade ago found that students with engaged parents 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 and show improved behavior, and
- adapt well to school (Henderson & Mapp, 2002).

Earlier yet, renowned researcher Joyce Epstein called for family and community engagement to improve school climate, provide families with needed support services, enhance parental skills, leadership, and school connections, and to help teachers better focus on their work: “When parents, teachers, students, and others view one another as partners in education, a caring community forms around students and begins its work” (Epstein, 1995).

The KnowledgeWorks Foundation, the National Clearinghouse for Educational Facilities, and related organizations call for schools to become “centers of community,” suggesting the more schools integrate with their community, the more effectively they draw upon the community’s “full-range of resources” (Bingler, Quinn & Sullivan, 2003). Their conclusions are supported by a review of some 20 community school evaluations findings by the Institute for Educational Leadership’s Coalition for Community Schools. In schools that serve as engaged centers of community, the report highlights notable improvements in four key areas: student learning, school effectiveness, family engagement, and community vitality (Blank, Melaville & Shah, 2003).

The Coalition report further notes: “Families of community school students show increased stability, communication with teachers, and school involvement. Parents demonstrate a greater sense of responsibility for their children’s learning” (Blank, Melaville & Shah, 2003). Supported by a national research-based policy forum on family/community engagement, the key is to get beyond random acts to transformational reform strategies that promote student success.
Family engagement is a shared responsibility of families, schools, and communities for student learning and achievement; it is continuous from birth to young adulthood; and it occurs across multiple settings where children learn. Although family involvement in education is not an original idea, a systemic and integrated approach to family engagement represents an innovative strategy in education reform (Weiss, Lopez & Rosenberg, 2010).

Research findings published in Education Week, May 25, 2011, indicate such attention to student, family, and community needs will become the norm rather than the exception in the near future. The authors of Why Attention Will Return to Non-School Factors suggest that when schools do what they are supposed to do—and what the public has asked them to do—payoffs are not limited to school performance; they include an array of outcomes that help communities and the nation to compete in a global economy, and build more informed citizens. The researchers also recognize that family and social intervention results should link to schools, and that progress needs to be measurable and long-term, yet provide ongoing feedback to determine more short-term progress:

“We’re not there yet. Our scenario for the future of school reform will require a new conception of education as encompassing broader ideas of child development. Then we must invest in new data systems to drive performance management and research. Only then will we have the strategies and tools that can transform our dream of high achievement and educational equality into reality (Henig & Reville, 2011).”

Families and communities are an essential force in turning around low-performing schools if family/school/community engagement moves from “a checklist to a full engagement plan,” particularly when outcomes tracking assesses student impact (Weiss, Lopez & Rosenberg, 2010). Random acts and lip service simply no longer suffice when the very sustainability of our nation as we know it is at stake.

"School problems are not just schools’ problems. The challenges our schools face every day are actually challenges facing our families, our communities and our country. —Joy Dryfoos and Sue Maguire, Inside Full Service Schools"

One Community School’s Experience

George Washington Community H.S., an authentic community school of just under 700 students in grades 7-12 on the near-Westside of downtown Indianapolis, has experienced substantial growth in parent and family engagement from one year to the next—with correlating student attendance, youth development participation, graduation rates, and academic achievement:

• Parent engagement is on the rise, with 815 individual parents participating in activities at Washington in 2010, and 251 of these parents participating in multiple events, a 46% increase
• Student attendance increased from 88% in 2008 to 94% by 2010
• The graduation rate increased from 47% in 2009 to 68.4% in 2010
• 94% of the student population participated in at least one community-provided support service
• Honor Roll status increased from 17% of the student population to 24%.

“…”

For more information about family engagement, contact The Indiana Partnerships Center at www.fscp.org.

“…”
Staff from the Indiana Partnerships Center (Indiana’s PIRC) helped school staff, community members and parents to move their engagement efforts from Parent Engagement 1.0 to 2.0 by going beyond “random acts” to make a more systemic, ongoing approach.

**Linking Involvement to Learning:**

Activities and programs for families will be more effective if they are linked to student learning.

At GWCHS, a team consisting of parents and educators worked together to link family engagement to school improvement efforts. Prior to parent/teacher conferences, The Right Question Workshop was implemented in English and Spanish to teach families a process to develop their own questions for increased home/school communication. A bi-monthly series of Family Fun Nights were also held for families on a variety of topics related to student learning. Additionally, Parent Focus Groups were implemented and 110 student surveys collected to determine perceptions of how students and families perceived the school’s ability to prepare students for graduating on time, prepared for college.

“Parent Shop” family workshops were facilitated for families at GWCHS and three elementary feeder schools on academic preparation, financial literacy, college readiness and success for post-secondary education and careers.

**Welcoming Culture:**

All families are active participants in the life of the school and feel welcomed, valued, and connected to each other, to school staff, and to what students are learning. GWCHS strategies include the creation of “The Family Loft” which provides families with access to district data, increases email communications between families and teachers, and houses a welcoming space for families to receive information about student learning. Further, more than 200 families were surveyed in Spanish and English using the National PTA and PTSO Surveys. Results were favorable, with 60% responding that the school welcomes all families and a majority agreeing that students are treated fairly regardless of race/culture background. Spanish-speaking families reported a satisfaction rate for family friendliness that resulted in staff and community partners increasing outreach.

**Strong Commitment and Leadership for Family Engagement:**

Consistent and clear leadership that drives the family engagement process throughout the school is essential to success. The Academy for Parent and School Leadership, provided by the Indiana Partnerships Center (IPC), empowered GWCHS families to participate in Community Advisory Council meetings. Open Houses were also held in the Family Loft to recruit parent leaders, and Professional Development was provided by the IPC staff, parent liaisons, and full-service community school staff on research and best practices for family engagement.

Staff development included time to create strategies for increasing home/school relationships, reduce absenteeism by more effectively communicating with families, and for teachers to engage in family nights.

A College Pathways Team was also created to meet with other district teams to increase college readiness support.

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Educational and social issues are more effectively addressed when school and community share accountability for the achievement and well-being of children; further, education researchers identify strong leadership as one of the characteristics of high performing schools. George Washington’s Community Advisory Council (CAC) works to identify and address these concerns within the school community, and membership in this inclusive group takes the form of civic, religious, business, and neighborhood leaders, as well as various school stakeholder groups (including teachers, support staff, parents, students, administrators). Leadership within the CAC is varied but shares a commitment to collective goals focused on academic achievement and social development of culturally diverse students, families, and communities. To ensure a qualitative, collaborative relationship aligned with academic achievement goals, the monthly CAC annually engages in school improvement planning as mandated by NCLB, Title I, Indiana Department of Education, Public Law 221, North Central Association Accreditation, and Indianapolis Public Schools.

Over the past couple of years, the school community implemented a number of family/community engagement strategies. Assisted by representatives and programs of the Indiana Parent Information Resource Center (PIRC), the school staff, community members, and volunteer parents teamed up and devised strategies to engage parents and families more in their children’s learning. Parent Liaison Betty White says it took a collaborative “try this and try that and see what works” approach. At George Washington, the student outcomes from implementing these strategies speak for themselves:

- 100 percent of recent graduating seniors accepted into post-secondary education
- Passage rates of End-of-Course assessments doubled
- George Washington has been recognized in state and national evaluations this past year as a model learning climate where real achievement gains are taking place.

“We had the highest scores in seven of 13 tests given for benchmarks throughout the IPS district, which includes magnet schools,” Principal Deborah Leser said in May. She credits school community supports for providing a solid foundation to making the academic achievement gains. “We likely wouldn’t be where we are without them,” she says.

Research and References:


About this Publication

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For more information about family engagement, contact The Indiana Partnerships Center at www.fscp.org.