A Proposal to Strengthen Family and Community Engagement within the Elementary and Secondary Education Act: An Implementation Guide

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August 2010

This guide is intended for school leaders who want to create partnerships with families and community members in their schools. There are many reasons to want to increase family and community engagement. First and foremost, family and community engagement helps students achieve.[1] In addition, creating partnerships allows for the pooling of resources so the school has access to more services,[2] creates a stronger community, and improves school practices.[3]

This guide is directed at school leaders because, though any parent, member of the school community, or community organization can initiate a partnership, principals play a key role in the success of school partnerships. Principals have the power to set the tone of the school; if a principal is not invested in engaging families and the community, the teachers and school staff will not exert much effort to do so. Any major school culture shift will have trouble succeeding without the support of the school administration, and effective partnerships require a committed school culture.

Partnerships involve more than just inviting families and community members to participate at the school. They require sharing power and responsibility, not to mention resources, to achieve a common goal: the academic achievement and developmental growth of students. The Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory defines a school/family/community partnership as "a collaborative relationship among the family, school, and community designed primarily to produce positive educational and social outcomes for children and youth, while being mutually beneficial to all parties involved. Partnerships assume mutual responsibility and mutual respect."[4] In order for school/family/community partnerships to be effective, each partner must recognize and respect the unique contributions the other partners can make to students' education.

Many families and schools view educating children as a division of labor: schools should provide academic development and families should provide social and emotional guidance, as well as nutrition and a healthy lifestyle. Community schools recognize that there is some truth to the adage "it takes a village" – that children benefit when all parts of their development are connected, and that education involves more than what takes place during the school day. Community schools are an intricate web of school/family/community partnerships. Most aspects of these schools are influenced by partnerships, and the school frequently houses services and resources that are valuable to the community. The Federation of Community Schools offers the following equation:

ABC's of Community Schools:
A = A*lign out of school time with class learning*
B = B*ring communities, families and schools together*
<u>+ ***C = C****oordinate resources for children and families*</u>
Success for children, families, schools and communities[5]

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[1] Perkins et al. 2004; Anderson & Minke 2007.
[2] Gold, Simon, & Brown 2002; Henderson & Berla 2000; Jehl 2007.
[3] *See* Epstein 2001.
[4] Ellis & Hughes 2002.
[5] Federation for Community Schools 2009.

While we believe community schools are the ideal vehicle for family and community engagement, we recognize that there are high obstacles to the implementation of a full-scale community school. We designed this guide to help traditional schools model the partnership aspect of community schools, which we believe *all* schools can implement effectively on some scale. Family and community partnerships can be greatly beneficial to all participants. However, there is no one-size-fits-all approach that will work. Schools serve different students with different needs and backgrounds, and are located in communities with varying levels of available services and resources. Because there are so many variables, a manual with very detailed instructions would only be helpful for a narrow fraction of schools. Instead, this publication should be seen as a guide to help you (the principal, administrator, or school leader) work with staff and stakeholders to create partnerships that will work for your school.

In addition, this guide assumes you are starting from the ground floor. It will help you build the trusting relationships with families that form the basis of effective partnerships. If your school communicates effectively with families already, the first few steps might not apply and you can jump to the part about engaging community partners. Or, you might find that the guide works best for your school in a different order. For example, if the families in your community are largely nonresponsive to the school's attempts to engage them, it may make more sense to engage community partners first. Those partnerships can be leveraged to reach out to parents and families through organizations they may be more comfortable and familiar with.

Finally, be patient. Successful partnerships are not created overnight, especially if there is any underlying animosity, ancient and fictional or recent and real, between parents and teachers. Overcoming misconceptions and building trusting relationships take time. Scrapping the initiative because it isn't effective in the first month, or year, of implementation will only exacerbate mistrust and poor communication between parents and school staff. In addition, it can be difficult to find the right roles for community members and the right organizations to lead certain initiatives. This guide cannot help you with that, because the right fit of families, community members, and school staff is unique to each school. Trial and error when it comes to partnering with organizations can be frustrating for all parties involved, but it may be necessary to ensure the partnerships can be effective and mutually beneficial.

Creating partnerships with families and community organizations is all about helping students – providing them with greater access to services and resources, increased numbers of supportive adults, and enriched learning opportunities. So figure out what will benefit students the most – and make it happen.

Good luck!

Chicago Appleseed
August 2010

TABLE OF CONTENTS

I. BUILDING FAMILY ENGAGEMENT 4
1. ***Clear Communication. 4***
2. ***Meaningful Engagement. 8***
3. ***Inclusive Engagement 15***
4. ***Advisory Council. 16***
5. ***Family Resource Center. 16***
6. ***Assess Engagement 17***

II. ASSESSING NEEDS AND READINESS. 18
1. ***Student Needs. 18***
2. ***Prioritization. 18***
3. ***Readiness. 18***

III. ASSESSING RESOURCES. 19
1. ***Existing Resources. 19***
2. ***Strengths. 19***
3. ***Long-Term Planning. 19***

IV. PARTNERING WITH THE COMMUNITY. 22
1. ***Positive Relations. 22***
2. ***Record Keeping. 22***
3. ***Natural Allies. 22***
4. ***Communication of Need. 23***

V. CREATING AN ACTION PLAN. 25
1. ***Long-Term Vision. 25***
2. ***Short-Term Goals. 25***
3. ***Action Steps. 25***
4. ***Progress. 25***
5. ***Partner Roles. 25***
6. ***Potential Obstacles. 26***
7. ***Financial Partnerships. 26***
8. ***Community Support. 26***
9. ***Long-Term Vision. 26***

VI. IMPLEMENTING THE ACTION PLAN. 27

RESOURCES. 28

I. BUILD FAMILY ENGAGEMENT BY CREATING AND FOSTERING TRUSTING, TWO-WAY RELATIONSHIPS WITH PARENTS AND FAMILY MEMBERS.

First, note that the focus is not on parents; the focus is on families. As you know, many students do not live in the typical nuclear structure with both parents, but may instead live with aunts and uncles, siblings, grandparents, step-parents, foster parents, family friends, and so on. Family engagement plans should be designed to include all of these people, and anyone else who loves, supports, and plays a significant role in a student's life. While "parent involvement plans" may serve to alienate non-parent relatives, family engagement plans are meant to be inclusive.

Also, remember that the goal is to create two-way relationships with *all* families, not just the ones who are eager to be involved. This includes family members who work two jobs, live far from the school, have young children at home, or who may be reticent to interact with the school, or who may not speak English or have a car.

1. ***CREATE A CLEAR AND COMPREHENSIVE COMMUNICATION PLAN.*** This has to be the very first step. Many parents do not receive timely and complete communication from their schools.[6] Before parents can be engaged at the school, they must know about the opportunities that exist.

   The communication plan should be detailed: it needs to include what methods will be used to communicate each type of information and appropriate back-up methods. It needs to include who will be responsible for communicating each type of information and how frequently. It needs to include who parents should contact and how to disseminate information to hard-to-reach families.

   Collect as much contact information as possible. To ensure that families will be kept in the loop, don't just ask for one phone number during enrollment. Ask for a work phone number, a cell phone number, an email address, a fax number, a work address, a grandparent's address or phone number, and so on. Then, ask which method is most likely to work. The more methods the school can employ to contact families, the more likely it is to effectively convey information. Though parents won't want to receive the same message five different ways, the same communication methods will not be effective for every family. By asking which communication method the parents prefer, schools can transmit messages in ways that are targeted to parents' needs and thus more likely to reach them. By gathering additional contact information, schools ensure that they still have a way to reach parents who move or change phone numbers.

   Accessibility
   All communication should be active and direct. Active and direct communication requires effort on the part of the school staff, and places the burden of contacting parents on the school team. Examples of active direct communication include:

[6] Appleseed; *see* Pena 2000.

- phone calls
- emails
- text messages
- mailings to a parent's home or business address
- personal contact, such as parent-teacher conferences, open houses, and home visits,

as opposed to passive communication, such as sending flyers home with students or publishing notices in a newspaper or to a website, which places the onus on parents to find out about events. If time or budget constraints render passive communication necessary, reinforce it with announcements on local radio and television stations and community bulletin boards. If families don't have phones, create a word-of-mouth system to ensure that as many community members are informed about upcoming events as possible. Steps should also be taken to ensure that communication with parents with disabilities is as effective as communication with other parents. (*This is required by law for Title I schools.*)

Additional suggestions to reach all parents:

- Work with area public libraries or community centers to make it easier for families to access computers for e-mail communication with the school and teachers.
- Consider providing literacy or technology training to enable parents to receive and read messages.

All communication should be in the home language of parents. This is a tricky balance to find. If one or two parents speak Polish, it probably does not make fiscal sense to translate every item of communication into Polish. If ten percent of the school speaks Polish at home, it probably does. Schools can tap into local organizations, businesses, universities, or churches that may have translators and be willing to provide these services at no cost. In addition, attempts should be made to ensure that outlier parents get all the important information, perhaps by pressuring their students to relay information or enlisting a bilingual community member who can help.

All communication should be in plain terms and language. Parents are turned off by sentences that are six lines long and full of acronyms and education jargon they can't understand. Make sure communications are in formats and language that are not challenging for parents to read.

Frequency

Make it clear that communication is not a one-time action. Parents may think that if their kids are well-behaved, the enrollment process is the only interaction they will have with the school. This is not the foundation for constructive parent engagement. Give parents a timeline; let them know when they should expect certain documents or communications. Better yet, give them a copy of the detailed communication plan the school team has created and explain it so parents understand what types of outreach they should expect from the school and when. Letting families know how frequently the

school will be in contact with them establishes a basis for parental engagement because it shows parents that they are a valued part of the education process. In addition, creating the expectation of communication increases the likelihood that parents will initiate a dialogue.

Repeat key communications on a regular basis. Let families know their third-grader will bring home directions for weekly at-home learning strategies each Monday and a progress report every Friday.[7] This decreases the potential that key communications get lost in students' backpacks because families will expect and look for the information.

Send frequent progress reports. These reports can keep parents informed about students' behavior and academic performance, as well as specific things families can do at home to help. Progress reports should be sent home monthly at a minimum; try to aim for bi-weekly.

Transparency

Be clear and honest with family members. Communicate with complete transparency. In order to foster a trusting and collaborative relationship with parents, it is crucial that all information is out in the open. Families resent schools that "hide the ball" or send mixed messages, so be as frank with families as possible. Though some school policies or the reasoning behind them seem obvious to administrators and teachers, they might not be so intuitive to parents, who may feel misled or lied to if they find out about certain policies halfway through the school year.

Make sure families are fully informed. Educate families about the school and their students so they are empowered to make informed decisions about how to engage. Below is a list, not exhaustive by any means, of information schools should make available to families, both at the beginning of the year and on an on-going basis.

- The school's parent involvement policy (*This is required by law for Title I schools.*)
- Parent and student rights and school and district responsibilities under Title I (*This is required by law for Title I schools.*)
- A description and explanation of the curriculum (*This is required by law for Title I schools.*) – e.g., what texts students will use, what topics they will learn at what points in the year, what the learning objectives are for each unit
- An individual report on their student's level of achievement on the state assessment (*This is required by law for Title I schools.*)
- Information on what types of assessments will be used and when they will be given (*This is required by law for Title I schools.*)
- Information on the proficiency levels and benchmarks students are expected to reach (*This is required by law for Title I schools.*)
- How the school and district operate in relation to each other and students
- Academic expectations and grading policies
- National or state learning standards and how they relate to the curriculum

[7] Ferguson 2005 (diverse populations).

- School programs, clubs, activities, and events
- Discipline policies
- Student performance and progress – both positive and negative, both academically and socially/behaviorally
- Student rights – e.g., how long do they have to make up missing assignments, who can they turn to in the school for support, how can they appeal grades or disciplinary actions
- Any actions that are taken with regards to their child or the school as a whole
- Special education policies and testing procedures (and how to initiate that process for their student)
- Who family members can contact with questions about their child's schoolwork, discipline, or the school in general
- Student support systems that exist – e.g., whether their child has access to a counselor, what sorts of academic supports are in place
- School and class policies – e.g., dress codes, attendance policies, rules about make-up work, tardy policies, who can pick up and transport students, emergency procedures
- School performance – by law, parents have a right to know how their child's school compares to other schools locally and nationally
- What courses students should take to graduate and qualify for higher education
- Any school or community-based services that support student growth and learning.
- Grievance policies – state, district, and school, as well as any less formal feedback structures that might apply

Hold an annual meeting. Kick off the beginning of the school year with a meeting to explain the school's obligations and performance, and ways that parents can get involved, in ways that are meaningful to parents. (*This meeting is required by law for Title I schools.*) At this meeting, provide school performance profiles and individual student results, describe school curriculum, assessments, and proficiency levels, and offer information about any extracurricular offerings or parent programs. This meeting can also be used to introduce parents to the school staff, teachers, or their students' curricula.

Additional suggestions to reach all parents:

- Hold a number of meetings at varied times to cater to parents with untraditional work schedules.
- Notify parents of the dates of meetings far enough in advance to allow them to request time off work.
- Provide transportation or bus fare, or help parents create carpools.
- Offer child care so parents with youngsters can come and home visits to explain the content of the meeting to parents who cannot attend.

2. ***DON'T JUST INVOLVE PARENTS,* ENGAGE *THEM.*** Traditional parent involvement plans relegate parents to minimal roles behind the scenes, frequently serving as a classroom aide or running a bake sale. Traditional parent involvement is frequently centered on activities that are controlled by the school or driven by the school's priorities. Family engagement, on the other hand, is centered on the capabilities and ideas family members can bring to school. Family engagement does not relegate parents to the background but encourages them to interact with students and teachers and supports them in initiating programs they know will benefit their children. Successful family engagement promotes a sense of shared power and responsibility between families and schools – power to create and implement initiatives to increase student achievement, responsibility to do so.

   Administrators and teachers frequently perceive that parents do not want to be engaged in school activities. If that is the case, it is probably because parents either do not know they have an important role to play in their child's education, do not know *how* to help their children in school, or do not feel welcomed into their child's school.[8] School leaders have the capability to change all of these perspectives so that families are willing and eager to be engaged in their student's education.

   Meet parents where they are. To effectively communicate with parents and lay the foundation for a trusting relationship, it is important to acknowledge that parents of different socio-economic and educational backgrounds have different capabilities and inhibitions when it comes to interacting with schools. Some parents might be very comfortable coming to the school and offering their feedback while others might defer to the school completely or be uncomfortable with the idea of coming to the school. In addition, some parents may have trouble reading or be self-conscious about their language skills. No school will be able to engage *every* parent, but schools that meet families on their level of comfort will enjoy much higher levels of engagement. Just as good teachers scaffold their lesson plans to meet students where they are, schools implementing family engagement plans may need to make efforts outside the school at the beginning, meeting parents at their home or at community centers and asking them to focus on how they can improve their children's education at home. But just as scaffolded lesson plans can help students increase their achievement over time, a scaffolded family engagement plan can gradually ramp up engagement by making parents increasingly comfortable taking part in their child's education.

   Jointly develop with parents a school-parent compact that outlines shared responsibility for student achievement. This can be done with a parent advisory committee, with the participation of the PTA or other parent organizations, or, at a small school, with all parents. The shared responsibility for student achievement is important – parents must feel that their contributions to their child's education are both valued and expected. This compact, once finalized, should be sent to all parents. (*Jointly developing the compact and distributing it to all parents is required by law for Title I schools.*) Each school should find the blend of commitments and responsibilities that meets their needs, but as a starting point, the compact should describe the school's responsibility to:

[8] Hoover-Dempsey, Walker, & Sandler (2005).

- provide high quality curriculum and instruction
- maintain a supportive environment that enables the students to focus on learning
- follow a consistent disciplinary policy developed in consultation with, or at least distributed to, parents
- treat family members as co-educators by keeping them informed about developments at the school and their child's performance, and by valuing and encouraging their contributions

The compact should address the fact that families may not know what their role is in their student's education by describing in detail the ways in which each parent will be responsible for supporting their children's learning, which might include:

- monitoring attendance, homework completion, after school activities, and television watching
- volunteering in their child's classroom
- helping their children establish stable and healthy routines, like a standard bedtime and nutritional meals
- modeling reading, learning and study habits
- providing specific academic assistance or helping their children find necessary academic supports
- developing kindergarten readiness
- participating and encouraging their children to participate in after-school, summer, and community activities linked to the school or extended learning opportunities
- participating, as appropriate, in decisions relating to the education of their children and positive use of extracurricular time

Many of these expectations might require parent training or guidance so they know how to fulfill these responsibilities. For example, a working parent may not know what amount of television watching is appropriate or how to enforce that limit. An immigrant parent might be uncertain how to best model good study habits. If schools want parents to maintain their side of the compact, they should provide training or guidance on how to do so.

The compact should also emphasize the importance of frequent, two-way communication between parents and teachers, and lay out the timeframe for progress reports, parent-teacher conferences, and school events and activities.

In addition, the compact should set boundaries so that parents know they are not welcome in a classroom during a test, for example. In setting boundaries, it is important to have honest dialogues with teachers and parents about what they are comfortable with and what is best for the students.

Empower families to participate in meaningful ways. Share data and research with family members on the importance of family engagement in students' education (e.g.,

how students whose parents are engaged display more positive attitudes towards school and decreased tendencies to engage in high-risk behaviors). Make sure they are informed about how their meaningful participation can positively impact their children's achievement.[9] Then, make sure they are informed on *how* they can become meaningfully engaged. Meaningful participation entails family members interacting with teachers, other parents, community members, or students to play a role in the school or their child's education. While some parents will take the initiative to participate, most will need the school to take the lead. Schools can provide parents with a list of suggested ways they can participate and then extend invitations through active and direct forms of communication on a regular basis. (For example, email parents once a month inviting them to eat lunch with their child or visit a classroom, or suggesting other ideas.) Some ideas of meaningful family participation include:

- organizing school events and assemblies

- eating lunch with their student. Spending time at the school during a less-structured activity can ease the anxiety parents may have about coming to school for meetings or conferences. Encourage family members to use this time to engage in conversations with their students about what they are learning in class. Parents who show interest in what their children learn send the message that class work is important. The lunch meeting can also be the basis of an informal parent-teacher conference.

- visiting their children's classrooms during instructional time when a new concept is introduced. This will allow parents to experience what the children are doing firsthand and better enable parents to support their child academically.

- engaging in joint problem-solving with their child's teachers around academic, social, or behavioral issues. Two-way communication is vital so that each party is fully informed and can best help the student. Effective communication about problems will also create a partnership between the parent and the teacher so that both are united in helping the child instead of resenting each other because they don't fully understand each other. It will prevent the student from receiving mixed signals.

- participating in school activities, whether they are schoolwide celebrations or classroom activities. Having parents come into the class for a science lesson, for example, allows them to engage with students in meaningful ways and connect to what their child is learning.

- participating in continuing parent education. The school can encourage this by offering workshops on how to monitor homework, for example – something many parents don't feel confident about because they struggle

[9] Hoover-Dempsey, Walker, & Sandler 2005.

to find the right balance of correcting errors and letting children make mistakes. Shedding light on this topic will empower parents to feel confident helping their student.[10]

- analyzing student data and collaborating with teachers to create specific action plans to increase student achievement

- collaborating with the school to develop a written parent involvement policy which describes the steps the school will take to involve parents (in a manner that fulfills the requirements of Section 1118 of Title I, if applicable).

- collaborating on school improvement plans or student enrichment strategies, especially in response to data such as test scores or graduation rates. The extent to which the school invites this participation can range from distributing a survey soliciting parents' opinions to hosting a meeting where parents can offer their ideas to engaging with parents in one-on-one conversations about what is best for their particular child.

- meeting with principals and teachers to discuss recent schoolwide and community events and issues that might affect learning and formulate an appropriate response.

- forming parent teams to address specific aspects of school culture (such as nutrition or social-emotional development) and implementing parent-driven programs, or collaborating with teachers to tackle the same issues

- participating in professional development on partnerships. Staff development is a great time for families and teachers to engage in dialogue about the importance of two-way communication and the best ways to achieve it. Encourage teachers to share what parental engagement means to them and looks like in their classrooms, and parents to share how they would like to be engaged.

- sharing their skills and experiences with students. This could be a one-off guest appearance in class, an after-school workshop, or a multi-week series of events. Teachers will especially appreciate it if the guests link their presentation to what students are learning in class.

- rallying other parents and community members to advocate at a school board, district, or state level for smaller class sizes, newer textbooks, or whatever causes will increase student achievement.

[10] Van Voorhis 2001.

While more traditional forms of parent involvement should not be the only ways families are invited to participate, they can still be useful to teachers and can attract parents who may be hesitant to get more actively involved at first. Recruit parents to volunteer in ways that have an obvious impact so parents are rewarded for their participation. These include:

- volunteering in their child's classroom as tutors, classroom aides and curriculum resources
- volunteering to improve the school environment by changing bulletin board displays or repainting the gym
- attending student performances, sports events, and other school-related activities
- assisting with field trips and volunteering in places they will get to interact with students such as the lunchroom, health clinic and front office

Encourage family learning. Seeing their parents engaged in learning activities is important for students. Parents can be great models for enjoying reading and learning, but they may not know how to best model this for their children. Some ideas for how to encourage family learning include:

- Provide training to help families feel that they can support their students effectively. Some training programs might include teaching family members how to:
    - monitor attendance, homework completion, after-school activities, and television watching
    - help their children establish stable and healthy routines, such as regular bed times and healthy eating
    - model reading, learning and study habits
    - provide homework help
    - develop kindergarten readiness
    - play educational games with their child (provide list of home activities parents can do to increase learning)

- Provide parents with strategies to incorporate learning into family time, such as taking advantage of free zoos, museums, or cultural exhibits, or playing math and word games while stuck in traffic or waiting for the bus.

- Ask teachers to give homework assignments that engage the entire family or encourage student-parent conversations.[11]

- Create opportunities for families to have fun together and learn together at the school, such as family literacy nights or geography bowls.

[11] *See* Van Voorhis 2001, explaining that interactive homework can help improve parent-child and parent-teacher communication.

- At a school event or through homework, engage students and their family members in an activity that explores the values parents hold and the hopes they have for their children's future.[12]

Support parent networking. Parents are more likely to come to school if they feel like they are supported, and parent networks can be a great source of ideas for how to increase parent engagement and student achievement and a catalyst for action. Here are some ways to do this:

- Support and cooperate with PTAs and parent-led groups. If none exist, suggest that some of the more active parents start one. A strong parent group can carry much of the burden involved with parent outreach and communication, and can frequently rally community members to donate resources to the school.

- Create space and time, formally or informally, for parent-to-parent conversations, so they can support each other and share experiences and resources. While an active PTA or PTO can provide this time, so can a bi-weekly coffee session in the cafeteria for family members. This could be exclusive to families, or teachers could be invited to drop in during their planning periods to connect with parents.

- Host support groups for single parents or parents with special needs children so they can discuss their unique challenges and use each other as resources.

- Create a space and time, formally or informally, for families and school staff to come together to discuss schoolwide issues and concerns. Helping parents see that the school is working for their child's best interest (which may be obvious to some and a surprise to others) increases trust, and seeking their input on problems sets a foundation for honest two-way communication.

- Have grade-level parent meetings and programs. These will provide networking opportunities to parents whose children are facing the same academic or developmental milestones and allow the school to impart important knowledge (such as college selection and financial assistance or how to support children hitting puberty).

- Have leadership development training for family members who want to take a more active role in the school. Empower them to train and lead other parents and family members in school improvement activities.

[12] Ferguson 2005 (diverse populations).

Create a school culture in which parents feel welcome and comfortable. Some adults who have negative memories of their own school days shudder just walking past a school building. Getting them to step through the doors can be a challenge. First, the school must be physically welcoming and friendly. Here are some ideas to create a warm physical space:

- Ensure that signage is welcoming (use "please" and "thank you" instead of "All visitors must report to the office") and in language parents can read (this means signs should be jargon-free and translated into parents' home languages).
- Create brightly-colored displays near the main entrance showcasing students' work or accomplishments.
- Ensure that the school is clean, especially the main entrance and restrooms.
- Use clear language on signs to point the way to parent destinations like the main office, the library, and the health clinic/nurse's office. Translate the signs into parents' home languages.
- Allow parents to use the school library, or at least a corner of it. Have a section designated for parents with parenting resources and a community directory.
- Make the main hallway and entrance as warm as possible, downplaying or painting the metal detectors and using live plants and bright colors.

Beyond the building itself, it is important to ensure that the school staff is welcoming and friendly to family members, and that they are on board with the family engagement efforts. One of the most effective ways to get the message across while training teachers and staff on how to communicate and interact with parents effectively is to create professional development for teachers and staff around family and community engagement. Frequently teachers and school staff are too busy to interact with parents regularly or meaningfully, or they may not want parental involvement at the school at all. Since family and community partnership initiatives require input and effort from all parties, it is important that teachers and staff welcome family and community members and see partnerships as a vital component to helping students succeed. Here are some ways to create a welcoming school staff:

- Instruct security guards and office workers to greet parents warmly and ask if they need directions to find their destination.
- Ensure that family members are not kept waiting for appointments when they arrive.
- Designate a family liaison in the school to work with parents and establish rapport.
- Communicate to parents that they are wanted in the school and that their participation with the school is valued and important – and then follow through by seeking and utilizing their input.
- Host open houses or set publicized times when teachers and staff are accessible to parents.

- Include family members in the professional development planning and delivery. Role-play a parent-teacher conference to instruct both parents and teachers on effective ways to communicate with each other.
- Encourage school staff to see families as assets and take advantage of their unique skills and perspectives and support for their students' education.
- Recognize that outside factors (such as family pressures) affect academic achievement – educational needs can be addressed more effectively with the support of and communication with students' families.
- Provide pre-service training on partnerships for incoming teachers to establish the school culture of community and family engagement and ensure that they are caught up to the professional development of the older teachers.
- Include successful family and community engagement as component of faculty evaluations.
- Create a structure for feedback to allow parents to share experiences and make suggestions. Then honor the parents' ideas, either by implementing them or at least considering them and thanking the parents, in a timely and respectful manner.

3. ***Be conscious of engaging* ALL *parents.*** In most schools, a reliable group of parents is the usual suspects: the executive board of the PTA, the room mothers, and the ones who never miss a parent-teacher conference. While these parents are valuable assets, it is crucial to engage those "hard to reach" family members. Their students are often the ones that could benefit from family engagement the most. Here are some steps schools can take to engage family members who may be reticent to interact with the school:

    - Help families with difficult transitions by reaching out the summer before kindergarten and high school. This will set the tone for family engagement through the duration of the schooling.
    - Host coffee with groups of parents in their homes or in other non-school settings where they may be more comfortable.
    - Visit local restaurants, libraries, and community centers to meet parents. Consider holding parent-teacher conferences at one of these locations.
    - Identify community leaders and parents who are already active at the school who have access to hard-to-reach parents. Ask them to help you communicate with parents the school isn't currently reaching.
    - Offer programs and workshops that address community needs, or allow community organizations to use the school building in the evenings. This is a way to get adults into the school building and hopefully interested in the students.
    - Get a translator or, even better, a parent who is bilingual to accompany school staff on visits with parents who do not speak English.
    - Host "Donuts with Dads" or similar programs to specifically target and engage men.

4. ***CREATE AN ADVISORY COUNCIL.*** This group can be comprised of teachers, administrators, family members, engaged community members, and students at the middle or high school level. Attempt to create a council that accurately reflects the diversity in the student population. Engage this advisory council in democratic and ongoing planning, reviewing, and improving the school family engagement policy and the joint development of the schoolwide program plan under ESEA Section 1114(b)(2). (*This is required by law for certain Title I schools.*) Utilize this council to critically assess the needs of the students and parents and brainstorm ideas for partnerships that will address those needs or otherwise add value to students' growth. Respond to data on student performance to address the specific issues in the school, from low test scores in math to high suspension rates.

5. ***CREATE A FAMILY RESOURCE CENTER.*** By providing parents and family members with a space of their own family resource centers convey that families belong in the school. These resource centers can support parents as learners by providing training, family-strengthening resources, adult or continuing education, and educational materials. They can also provide families with resources to help their students and referrals to community services. They can be a place for family members to meet and support each other. A family resource center can be costly, but it can garner a large amount of family engagement for schools that can afford it. In addition, a scaled-back version of this could be implemented cheaply by using a folding partition to create physical separation and placing community resource directories in a corner of the library. The key to a successful family resource center, regardless of how expansive or meager it may be, is to clearly communicate to families that the room (or corner) is for them.

    - Be resourceful in finding extra space. The resource center could be in a classroom that is only used a few hours a day or in a corner of the school library.

    - Think about staffing the resource center with a parent volunteer, community member, or rotating teacher.

    - Be mindful of additional security concerns that might arise with adults freely coming and going within the building. Have them check in at the main office first, or come up with a security solution that fits the school layout and culture.

    - Seek donations. Resource centers can be stocked with furniture, office supplies, a coffee pot, and other amenities that are contributed by local businesses.

    - Some ideas for how to stock a family resource center include:
        - toys and books to keep young children entertained while their parents utilize the resources
        - a directory of cultural and community services and resources

- information about current and upcoming school programs and events, both for families and students
- resources for families on how to best support their students
- educational games, books, and videos that families can check out for their students
- specific educational materials that teachers can recommend for certain parents to use with their students at home.
- comfortable furniture where parents can talk with other parents and arrange meetings with teachers or wait for appointments with teachers and administrators
- "an exchange box where parents and teachers can drop off unwanted books, toys, and surplus household items and take or borrow them for their own use."[13]

6. ***ASSESS ENGAGEMENT.*** Use attendance counts to determine what percentage of parents are participating and surveys to determine their level of satisfaction. Respond to parents' needs; if the school provides something that is useful to them they will get engaged. Seeing that their concerns are being addressed builds parents' trust in the school. If attendance at events or satisfaction is low, recruit family members to help determine the cause and revise the engagement plan.[14]

[13] U.S. Department of Education 1996.
[14] *See, e.g.*, Appleseed's "Parent Involvement Effectiveness Assessment for Elementary Schools," available at http://appleseednetwork.org/bOurProjectsb/Education/ParentInvolvement/Assessment/tabid/624/Default.aspx.

II. Assess the needs of the students and the school's readiness to engage with community partners.

1. ***Ask probing questions to assess students' needs.*** With students, teachers, the parent advisory committee, and other interested parents, determine which needs are the most urgent for student success.

    - What barriers are preventing students from succeeding?
    - What are the causes of these barriers?
    - What conditions in or out of school interfere with student success?
    - What programs and services would make it easier for students to succeed?
    - What programs and services would make it easier for families to support students?
    - What programs and services would make it easier for teachers and school staff to support students?

2. ***Hone in on your priorities.*** At beginning of new initiative, maintaining a narrow scope is crucial. While it might be tempting to try to create five partnerships to start off, it is better to create one solid community partnership first to gain family and community support. Scaling up will be possible and easier after initial successes.

3. ***Assess the willingness of teachers and staff to make partnerships a priority.*** Every member of the school community will have to devote some time and resources to make partnerships successful. Staff or administrators will need to have the school open and resources available for community partners to implement after-school or weekend programs. Teachers will need to commit to extra outreach to parents, since teachers are the main liaisons and points of contact, and have the most in-depth information about the students. In addition, many after-school or parent programs might depend upon classrooms space, so it is essential to have the support of the teachers and staff who have primary use of those spaces. Misunderstandings over who gets the room at certain times and who is responsible for messes will undermine collaborative efforts. Counselors and support staff should be prepared to liaise with community members and give up some of their domain to create a larger net of support for students and their families.

    Lack of full buy-in from faculty and staff could prevent family engagement and community partnerships from being successful if some teachers do not reach out to parents or if office staff is unwelcoming, for examples. If the faculty and staff do not fully support the initiatives, use staff development to reinforce the importance of partnerships. Show data on the impact partnerships can have for student success. Emphasize the importance of addressing all of a child's needs, and how partnerships can help a school do that.

III. ASSESS EXISTING RESOURCES.

1. ***ASK PROBING QUESTIONS TO UNCOVER THE RESOURCES THAT CAN BE THE MOST HELPFUL.***
    - What resources are most needed?
    - What resources and services are currently available in the school and in the community?
    - How are these resources being used currently?
    - How can the school and community work together to utilize resources most efficiently?
    - Are there obvious choices for community partners that are especially well-positioned to support the needs of the students?

2. ***BUILD ON STRENGTHS.*** Collaborate with non-profits and neighborhood services to determine what the community is already doing well or has great capacity for and how that strength can be paired up with the school. Embrace what makes your community unique, whether it is a strong Puerto Rican culture or its location on the riverfront, and use it to your advantage to create excitement and rally community support. What are people in the community proud of? By the same token, only utilize programs that are effective and relevant for the students in your school.

3. ***KEEP THE FUTURE IN MIND.*** Consider future plans to scale up. While new initiatives and partnerships are limited in their scope (and should be kept small at the beginning), it is helpful to keep in mind more long-term goals. When forming partnerships, think about the long-term needs and resources that might be down the road. Ask probing questions with a long-term scope:
    - How successful is the school and school community at providing academic supports and social development for students?
    - Are other resources and service providers in the community effective in addressing youth and family needs?
    - Do families and residents have easy access to all the services they need?
    - Would there be a more efficient way of providing services to students and their families?

    Consider potential future roles and supports community partners might be able to play so you can begin to cultivate those relationships now or engage those partners in other ways. Here are some ideas for the various ways community partnerships can provide resources:
    - Creation of a resource coordinator position to negotiate and manage various partnerships and provide resources and service referrals to parents
    - A coordinated network with multiple neighborhood resources and service providers to provide comprehensive cradle-to-college support
    - Creation of a promise neighborhood
    - Opportunities for extended-learning time for students, including morning and after-school programs, weekend and summer programs, and camps during winter and spring break. These could also be opportunities to try untraditional learning methods, such as

problem-based approaches, which many teachers do not employ in the classroom.

- Enrichment or complementary learning opportunities in the arts, foreign languages, or physical education and fitness that tie in to students' academic curriculum. These programs could be limited to students or expanded to their parents, or the community at large.
- Hands-on and experiential educational opportunities or cultural educational opportunities, including field trips and evening outings to museums, zoos, concerts, science laboratories, etc.
- Supplementing existing resources or providing missing resources to students, families, and community members, such as:
    - early childhood programs that will focus on kindergarten readiness
    - English classes for those with limited English proficiency
    - technology literacy training and access to computers
    - centralized health services within the school or a community center
    - drug and alcohol abuse education, prevention, and support
    - library services
    - violence prevention
    - mental health services
- Peer mediation and conflict resolution training and supervision for students
- Leadership programs for students
- Advanced placement and college level courses offered through a partnership with local institutions of higher education
- Training and supervision for parent mentoring or tutoring programs, perhaps with stipends for parent volunteers[15]
- Community learning centers that will provide adult education
    - ESL classes
    - GED classes
    - Child development instruction
    - Parenting education
    - Job training
- Intensive academic intervention programs for students who experience need additional support in school, and in-depth counseling for students who experience troubles at home or with friends
- Onsite childcare (at the school for students who are parents, at school and community events for families and community members in general)
- Service learning opportunities
- Universal breakfast and healthy snacks at school
- Community gardening programs[16]
- Coordination with the local business community to create career bridges for students and community members by hosting career workshops and

[15] *See* Logan Square Neighborhood Association 2009.
[16] *See* http://assoc.garden.org/ and http://gardenabcs.com/ for curriculum ideas, http://assoc.garden.org/ag/asg/index.php for info about registering for the Adopt-a-Garden program.

fairs, creating opportunities for externships, providing apprenticeships and on-the-job training, etc.

- Community events to engage all community members such as reading nights or book fairs, art shows, concerts, neighborhood fairs, etc.

IV. PARTNER WITH COMMUNITY MEMBERS AND ORGANIZATIONS.

1. ***FOSTER POSITIVE COMMUNITY-SCHOOL INTERACTIONS.*** Frequently, schools are islands within a community, especially in urban schools in low-income and minority communities. Teachers go straight to the school and then straight home, rarely interacting with the surrounding neighborhood; the community, for its part, may isolate the school and the school staff from community events and councils. For students, it is beneficial that these two parts of their lives are united rather than separate, to foster more continuity in their learning and their support systems. Here are some ideas on how to encourage collaboration between the school and the community:
    - Create a service learning or community service program so that students have a chance to contribute to their community. This will also serve to increase the visibility of the school.
    - Invite the local business community to host workshops for teachers on community resources and cultural opportunities.
    - Host a breakfast for local civic and business leaders where teachers can share their success stories.
    - Provide community leaders with the opportunity to tour the school or visit a classroom. Share recent successes as well as areas of need.
    - Host a student expo or a science fair and invite community members to attend and judge student projects. This will foster dialogue between students and supportive neighborhood adults.
    - Allow community members access to the school library and computer labs when students are not using them.
    - Invite community groups to use school facilities for meetings.
    - Use a marquee outside the school or a community bulletin board or calendar to keep residents informed of school activities they might like to attend, such as plays or sporting events.
    - Use active and direct communication to make sure families and students are aware of events and cultural opportunities within the community.

2. ***KEEP SCRUPULOUS RECORDS AND MINUTES OF MEETINGS.*** Once multiple stakeholders are invested in activities at the school, there is an increased chance of miscommunication and conflict. Keeping detailed notes of exactly what plans are agreed upon, and making the minutes and notes available to interested parties will minimize the possibility of misunderstandings.

3. ***IDENTIFY COMMUNITY MEMBERS AND ORGANIZATIONS WHO ALREADY WORK FOR STUDENT SUCCESS.*** With students, teachers, the parent advisory committee, and other interested parents, assess the community to locate potential partners.
    - Do community leaders or organizations already act to promote strong families or provide services to address student needs?

- "Are local groups (parent, neighborhood, social service, religious, or philanthropic) already working to improve the neighborhood's schools?"[17]
- Are there other important community stakeholders that should be involved in the partnership process?
    - parents and other neighborhood residents
    - students
    - teachers, administrators, and other school staff
    - community-based youth and family development organizations
    - local faith community
    - local arts community
    - local colleges and universities
    - local law enforcement
    - local business leaders and the chamber of commerce
    - representatives from the city office of neighborhood planning
    - education advocates, e.g., representatives from the local Public Education Fund
    - local grant makers with an interest in education
    - community organizing groups
    - local elected officials/policymakers
    - community development corporations[18]

4. *COMMUNICATE THE NEED FOR COMMUNITY PARTNERS.*

Center the communication around the priority areas addressed. For example, a school that has identified improved library and technology facilities might start by informing potential partners that students are struggling to read because there aren't enough books in the library and the ones that are present are not at the appropriate reading level. In addition, the lack of computers in the school means that students will not be prepared to succeed in our 21st century workforce because they won't have the necessary technical skills. The school team can then communicate to the potential partner that A) the need is urgent (Literacy and technology capabilities are two of the most crucial skills students need to succeed.), and B) the partner can help (A partnership with the local business community to host a book drive could double the size of the existing library.).

Stay focused. Undoubtedly, the students have dozens of needs other than the few focus issues. However, to create successful partnerships (which will create support for future endeavors), it is essential to remain focused on a few priorities. This will prevent energy from being diffused across too many efforts and will keep the undertaking from seeming too overwhelming.

Share pertinent data to create a sense of urgency. Display and discuss school data in a way that family and community members can understand and feel connected to. Use this data to show where there are needs, and then discuss how partnerships can address those needs.

[17] Hill, Campbell, & Manno 2000.
[18] Hill, Campbell, & Manno 2000.

- Performance Data – How well are students performing? Are performance data disaggregated by race and income? What are attendance and graduation rates?
- Enrollment Data – Where do neighborhood attend school? How many attend neighborhood public schools, nonpublic schools in the neighborhood, and public and private schools outside the neighborhood? How many students attend those different schools? What is the race/ethnicity and economic status of the student body? What is the mobility rate?
- Staff Data – What is the teacher-to-student ratio? What is the average class size? Are teachers qualified to teach the subjects they are teaching?
- Budget Data – How much is spent per student? How much of the school budget is spent on staff (teachers, paraprofessionals, administrative staff)? How much goes to student services? How much is allocated for professional development? What outside sources of funds are available and how are they used?"[19]

Empower and encourage stakeholders to spread information and urgency. After identifying key community partners, empower them to utilize their networks to create support and excitement around partnerships and community engagement in schools. Charge family members and community partners with tapping into the strengths and interests of those in their network to increase community engagement.

Convey shared ownership of students. It is crucial that families and community members feel as though they are responsible for the academic success of the students. Volunteers will only work for a cause that is important to them personally. By centering efforts on students and communicating the impact family engagement can have on their success, schools can empower parents to devote their energy to their partnership with the school. By emphasizing the importance of student success on community development, schools can appeal to community organizations eager for young successful members.

Once the partnership is created, school staff, families, and community members should be on equal footing. Always put the students first. Frequently, it is easy for teams of adults to get caught up in their interpersonal issues or their own desires. Remember, and remind the entire team, that the primary purpose of building these partnerships is to increase student achievement.

Communicate opportunities for partnership. Highlight the different services, strengths and skills that various stakeholders can contribute. In order to maintain harmony, stay focused on the end goal. Link every action and plan to student success. The constant reiteration of the importance of cooperative partnerships and the contributions of all members for the success of the students can go a long way towards keeping negative sentiments and hurt feelings in check.

[19] Hill, Campbell, & Manno 2000.

Discuss each partner organization's mission and expectations. Remember that successful partnerships are mutually beneficial. While the organization brings benefit to the school, it must also be meeting its own mission for the partnership to succeed long-term. This will create a stronger partnership and will lend itself to collaboration on future projects.

V. WORK TOGETHER TO CREATE AN ACTION PLAN.

1. ***CREATE A CLEAR VISION STATEMENT.*** The vision statement will be the guiding principle for actions moving forward. The clearer it is, the more guidance it will provide. Make sure the vision statement refers to partnerships as a tool to create student success.

2. ***DEFINE THE IMMEDIATE GOALS AND OUTCOMES.*** Use specific language to describe the desired goals and outcomes. What exactly are you planning and working towards? It is crucial to determine what success will look like before you begin so you know what data to collect and what specific steps will yield progress. How will you know when you have succeeded?

3. ***DETERMINE HOW YOU WILL ACHIEVE THE GOALS.*** Create a timeline for implementation that details when specific actions that will be taken to reach the desired outcomes. Make sure to include:
    - Lead actor for each step and the actions they will take
    - Actions and role of each supporting partner
    - Funding and resources needed for each step
    - Methods to garner and maintain additional support for the plan among school staff and community members

4. ***DETERMINE HOW YOU WILL MEASURE PROGRESS TOWARDS ACHIEVEMENT.*** and various outcome indicators so that adjustments can be made along the way. What tools and measurements will you use? Use specific language to describe the means you will use to attain and measure goals.
    - Methods to keep all family members and community members informed of progress towards goals, including those with disabilities, those who are not fluent in English, and those who do not have traditional family structures
    - Evaluation procedures and tools (satisfaction surveys, attendance surveys, usage data, etc.) for each step and for the overall plan

5. ***OUTLINE THE ROLES EACH PARTNER WILL PLAY IN REACHING THESE SPECIFIC GOALS, AS WELL AS OVERALL EDUCATIONAL GOALS.*** Make sure each partner is clear what their expected contributions are and when they need to be active.
    - How will each partner (school, families, community members, students, and community organizations) be responsible for maintaining the partnership?
    - What will each partner contribute to the pursuit of the goal?
    - What role will family members play?
        - volunteers
        - tutors
        - advocates

    - continuing learners
- What will community organizations offer?
    - space
    - money
    - health or other essential services
    - apprenticeships for students or families
    - staff support
    - programming for students or families

6. ***ANTICIPATE POTENTIAL OBSTACLES.*** Decide now, as a team, how you will respond to them. Some potential obstacles schools and partnerships might face include:
    - lack of complete buy-in from school staff
    - a shift in priorities of either teachers or principals (either because of new attitudes or new staff)
    - parent interest drop off, parent burnout
    - low attendance (either because of lack of interest or lack of transportation and childcare)
    - friction and disagreements among parents, community organizations, and school staff
    - language barriers or other communication problems
    - growing resentment among parties

7. ***SEAL THE PARTNERSHIP WITH A SHARED FINANCIAL COMMITMENT.*** It is important to agree upon a budget, and who will contribute each part of it, up front. Utilize parent and community volunteers to seek out grants and donations to cover the costs of additional resources for students, equipment for a family resource room, or the costs of additional programming.

8. ***GARNER SUPPORT IN THE COMMUNITY.*** Use the coalition power of a school/family/community partnership to get local politicians on board, or identify common objectives (i.e. decreased school violence) that elected officials are already working on. Staying on the radar of political officials is the key to getting an additional cut of funding, plus gaining access to officials' potential knowledge of currently untapped or underutilized resources. Elected officials can use their political capital to push for increased funding allocations to school/community partnerships. Keep elected officials informed on the program's obstacles and needs to ensure the school partnership is always on their mind. Setting up site visits for political officials to tour program locations and speak with students reinforces the needs that exist while providing elected officials with direct access to their constituents. In addition, make sure to share your successes! It's important to share victories both with stakeholders and the general public, and to regularly revise and improve the plan based on feedback.[20]

9. ***STAY FOCUSED ON THE SHARED MISSION.*** Have a vision of what successful partnerships will look like. A common vision and goals allows stakeholders to form clear expectations and makes it easier to prioritize activities and initiatives. Without a clear vision and goals, it may be difficult to get full buy in, or to make sure that parents, teachers, community members, and school staff

[20] Ellis & Hughes 2002.

are all on the same page. What is happening as a result of positive school-family-community partnerships? What impact is your partnership having on academic achievement? Plan for sustainability. The eight previous steps, if implemented, can keep the ball rolling on partnerships past the initial momentum. Focusing on the vision will help keep partnerships strong even after the novelty wears off.

VI. Implement the plan.

Celebrate small victories: increased attendance (students or parents), etc. Focus on good things parents are already doing and what additional they can do.

Evaluate effectiveness. Do the partnerships look like you expected? Are your goals being met? Revise the engagement plan, with the collaboration of your partners, to meet any missed targets. Then, when you're ready, scale it up to initiate new partnerships or implement new programs with existing partnerships.

SAMPLE PROGRESS REPORT FOR HIGH SCHOOL

PROGRESS REPORT FOR ____*10/8/2010*__, WEEK __*6*___
Student: _____

PERIOD	CLASS	BEHAVIOR	HOMEWORK	CLASSWORK	COMMENTS	TEACHER'S SIGNATURE
These two sections can be filled out by the student in their homeroom class. Then all teachers have to do is make three marks and initial the report during the course of class time.		*Teachers can put grades for the week, pluses and minuses, or a rating from 1-5. It doesn't have to be exact, as long as the marking system is explained to parents. The point is for parents to be able to monitor their student's progress week-to-week and address any serious concerns.*			*Again, teachers can use this space to write parents a note or just to stamp a star or smiley face.*	

Parent signature: _____
**All students may be required to get a parent to sign their progress reports or only students with marks of concern. These can be returned to homeroom or first period teachers who will then have the responsibility of following up with parents who did not return the progress report, or other members of the school staff can assume that duty.*

Identifying School/Community Assets and Resources: School/Community Needs Assessment

What school community assets, e.g., programs, resources, skills, and capacities are available in your school and community for potential or current use in addressing needs and solutions identified? The following are just some examples of some of the sources of school and community assets:

Assets of local business/industry	Assets of advocacy groups
Assets of local school systems	Assets of human service organizations
Assets of churches	Assets of community-based organizations
Assets of cultural subgroups	Assets of the judicial system
Assets of the media	Assets of community artistic organizations
Assets of civic organizations	Assets of ....

First Need:

Asset Source	List Assets	How can this asset be used to impact on needs?	Who must be contacted to access this asset?
(Community/county dentist)	***(Screenings in school)***	***(Have dental status of children assessed to develop dental strategy)***	***(Local dentist, American dental association, local health dept.)***

[21]

[21] http://www.ncrel.org/sdrs/areas/issues/educatrs/leadrshp/le3plan.htm

Sample agenda for first meeting:

1. Contact a well-respected family or community member from the school neighborhood and ask that person to co-facilitate a meeting to explore expectations for the students in the community. Discussion at this meeting should focus on *What we want for our students.*
2. Invite school staff, family members, students, and community members to attend the meeting. Be sure to take advantage of the contacts the co-facilitator has in the community.
3. Divide the participants into groups of four or five and give each group the following question to discuss: *What does being educated mean to you?*
4. Ask each group of four or five to join a second group and again discuss this question.
5. Ask the larger group what they have heard in their smaller groups. Record these answers on chart paper and post.
6. Ask the large group if they have heard something that they would not have considered before this discussion. Record those responses on chart paper and post.
7. Ask the larger group if they heard any patterns or common threads across all of the discussions. Record these responses on chart paper and post.
8. Close the meeting.
9. Be sure to share a report communicating the key points of the responses to each question and the meeting in general with families and staff via a newsletter, Web site, newspaper story, or one-on-one contacts with families and staff. [22]

[22] Ferguson 2005 (community connections).

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES FOR SCHOOL LEADERS

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The Children's Aid Society. (2001). Building a community school, 3d edition. This is a thorough guide on building a community school from the ground up, and many of the ideas can be applied to smaller-scale community partnership building. This guide can be found on the Coalition for Community Schools' "How To" toolkits page, along with many other helpful resources: http://www.communityschools.org/resources/howto.aspx.

Michigan Department of Education. *Parent engagement information and tools: Moving beyond parent involvement to parent engagement*. Available at http://www.michigan.gov/documents/Parent_Involvement_Part_1_12-16-04_111426_7.pdf. This document is full of parent engagement assessment tools, indicators, and specific best practices. "What Research Says About Parent Involvement In Relation to Academic Achievement" on p. 72-75 is a stark data sheet that can be distributed to teachers, parents, and skeptics to garner support for parent involvement.

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