



Families and Schools Partner for Student Success

Teachers need support in recognizing families as assets and in building authentic partnerships with them just as parents need help in learning about school expectations and how to support their child's learning.

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by Meenakshi Khanna

In 2004, the Center for Collaborative Education (CCE) in Boston launched an initiative to improve the extent and quality of family engagement at two public middle schools, and to show how strong school-family partnerships can produce increased student engagement and better school performance. This initiative, funded by a generous grant from the Charles Hayden Foundation—an organization that supports programs serving low-income youths in New York and Boston—is based on research that families play a powerful role in the education and development of children. This initiative involves schools and families working together to serve the best interests of the child, and schools learning to value family members as assets.

School-family partnerships are particularly important for urban schools that serve a high percentage of low-income students and students of color. When schools recognize the strengths and opportunities inherent in the diversity their families bring, they view families as assets.

CCE partnered with two Boston public schools—the Mary Curley School and the Lilla G. Frederick Pilot Middle School—to implement this initiative. Both schools serve approximately 700 students with similar demographics: high percentages of the students are low-income, enrolled in special education, and are English-language learners.

Families as True Partners

At the time, the Lilla Frederick School was beginning to implement its vision that families are true partners in their children's education and that true partnerships between families and schools occur when families have an equal voice in the education of their children. The Mary Curley School considered family partnerships important but did not have well-developed partnerships with families. Each school had a committed and knowledgeable family coordinator who worked closely with CCE.

CCE, the family coordinators, and school leaders developed a plan based on the Turning Points theory of family engagement. [Turning Points](#) is a national middle school reform model that believes healthy school-family partnerships serve the best interests of the students. In the Turning Points model, schools form productive partnerships with families when they develop a base of understanding and respect for families. There are many levels of family engagement, which range from supporting learning at home to being equal partners in decision-making at school.

We launched the initiative by conducting a Family-Engagement Institute, which had two main goals:

- Build each school's capacity to assess the range and effectiveness of family engagement activities currently in place at the school; and
- Empower each school to develop and launch a comprehensive family engagement plan.

Over the course of the initiative, CCE conducted several institute sessions based on Turning Points' theory and continually worked with teams to assess and support the work at the schools, with teachers and family members working together as peers.

As a result of the first institute, each school developed surveys that asked families to identify the most helpful services the school should provide. Survey results indicated that while both

schools communicated with families in many ways, parents wanted specific advice on how to determine if their child was making adequate academic progress and how to support their child's learning. CCE decided this was a good starting point for the initiative.

Family Involvement Activities

Both schools implemented several activities for family members that were focused on student academic achievement. Activities included awards nights and workshops on topics parents had identified (preparing eighth graders for high school, for example). The two most compelling activities were the English as a Second Language (ESL) classes for adults at the Mary Curley School and Student Shadow Day at the Lilla Frederick School.

At the Mary Curley School, we hired an experienced ESL teacher whose goals included helping parents learn how to support their child's school experience in the United States. The ESL teacher introduced the parents to community resources such as the public library, and she took parents and children to a local bookstore where they learned how to select books at their reading level. The culminating activity was a class where parents and their children came together to discuss their experiences as middle school students and as parents. This was a very powerful experience as children and adults left the class with new insights about each other.

At the Lilla Frederick School, teachers determined that the first step in helping parents understand the school's academic expectations was to make the school a more welcoming place. To do this, teachers planned Student Shadow Day, where parents shadowed their children and participated in their classes. Teachers worked hard to make the day fun as well as focused on student learning. It was a success and at the end of the day, family members commended teachers on their good work and they shared strategies that worked with their children at home.

One parent wrote this about the experience: "I think this was a very positive effort to afford me the opportunity to walk in my daughter's footsteps. I walked away from this experience with a better understanding of the elements and interactions that my daughter [is] dealt with on a daily basis." Students also reported positive reactions. One commented, "It was nice because [my mom] had a fun time and for the first time she was up here for education and not me in trouble."

Accomplishments and Lessons Learned

As a result of this initiative, family coordinators at each school learned to engage in a process of gathering and analyzing data and developing plans based on the data. Teachers and staff learned how family engagement could be a vehicle for student success and learned that while most parents wanted to support their child's learning, many did not know how to do so. Teachers and staff also learned that a parent's definition of family engagement often differs from that of the school. Both schools implemented some effective activities that focused on improving academic achievement. These activities received positive feedback from parents, students, and staff.

Lessons learned included:

- Family engagement initiatives must be driven by the unique conditions of each school. Data collection and analysis of existing conditions at the school will help develop meaningful and effective schoolwide plans. Once plans are implemented, they should be assessed for evidence of success.
- Teachers at both schools recognized the importance of understanding and valuing the cultures of their students' families and working with families as equal partners to best serve the needs of students. However, many teachers need support in recognizing families as assets and in building authentic partnerships with them. Families, too, need help in understanding school expectations for their children and how to support their learning.
- In order to build productive relationships with families, schools must provide both the structure and the opportunity for creating partnerships with parents at many levels. A good first step is helping families understand the school's academic expectations and

providing specific, concrete examples of helpful activities they can do to support their child's learning.

The Two Schools Today

The Lilla Frederick School provides several opportunities for families to work with the school. These include a large and active parent council where parents have a voice in the decision-making process, a support group for parents of special-needs students, and the Technology Goes Home program, which is supported by the Digital Bridge Foundation. This program has been enormously successful in bringing families to school, training them on computer applications, and providing them with a laptop and printer at a low cost.

The Mary Curley School is now a K-8 facility. Families were invited to be part of the conversion process, and the school continues to provide support for immigrant families. Both schools have continued to deepen their work with families, moving toward the goal of building solid, lasting partnerships.

Meenakshi Khanna is a school development coach at the Center for Collaborative Education in Boston. Her e-mail address is mkhanna@ccebos.org.