

PARTNERING



The 10th School Revisited: Are School/Family/Community Partnerships on the Reform Agenda Now?

Mr. Davies makes a series of recommendations that add up to a plea for changing the culture of schools so that partnership is a way of life that offers benefits to all who are engaged and becomes a tradition rather than a funded project.

BY DON DAVIES

Visit 10 schools randomly in the United States and you will discover in nine of them that most teachers and administrators still hold parents at arm's length. You will see many of the tried-and-true forms of parent involvement — an open house in the fall, two or three short parent conferences a year, parents attending student performances and sports events, some teachers calling parents when a child is misbehaving, an annual multicultural fair, a parent association that raises money, and a business partner that donates equipment. But you'll observe few if any parents or community representatives actively involved in the school's efforts to make changes in curriculum, teaching, student rules, homework policies, or scheduling.

I WROTE those words in 1996 in an *Education Week* commentary. I went on to assert that the 10th school would be different — and better. My comments were widely circulated by the Institute for Responsive Education and provoked considerable reaction. It is time to revisit my 10th school claim and ask what has happened in the intervening years.

Because of the rapid advance of the high standards/accountability/testing movement (49 states have new standards, 48 have testing programs geared to higher standards, and many states are threatening to take over failing schools), I expected that

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there would be substantial action toward involving families and the community in schools. I also expected that the growing national concern — expressed by politicians, business leaders, and educators — about the huge, widening gaps in achievement between white and African American and Latino children would prod more districts, schools, and parent and community organizations to recognize that schools can't close these gaps alone. I thought that more parties would act on the fact that substantial engagement of home and community is likely to increase the chances of success of any reform effort. If rational planning didn't produce action, I thought that desperation might spur new strategies.

Have these expectations been realized? The answer is yes and no.

Some things have changed.

Now it seems that everybody talks about, studies, and advocates parent and family involvement. The "whole village" idea is widely embraced, and "partnership" has become a mantra. There is hardly a politician, educational leader, organization, or conference that doesn't highlight in some way families, parent involvement, and partnership. They are now the equivalent of "motherhood and apple pie." This surge of interest in and acceptance of the ideas of parent involvement and partnership is gratifying.

But practices in most schools have hardly caught up with the flourishing rhetoric. I still stand behind my 10th school assertion, and some of my colleagues in the parent advocacy world would say that I am much too generous with this assessment. There has certainly been an increase in business involvement in many places, and more local education foundations are providing outside financial help. Some districts and schools have increased parent or community involvement, but this effort is still too often seen as a side show, not directly linked to school reform aimed at increasing student achievement and closing gaps in student performance.

There are some scattered developments focused on involving parents in closing the achievement gaps that seem promising. For example, seven urban principals are cited in the Heritage Foundation's *No Excuses* report as setting high standards in low-income schools. Nearly all of them "work actively with parents to make the home a center of learning" and to make the school "a force for stability in an impoverished community."¹

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Other positive examples include the expanded family centers in the schools in Rochester, New York; a small family literacy project in Boston; and work by action teams in some of the schools in Joyce Epstein's School, Family, and Community Partnerships Network. But there is little other evidence that many school systems or individual schools are initiating new, comprehensive programs of partnership that are specifically and strongly linked to achieving high standards.

I am still an optimist about the future of America's public schools and about the possibility that a culture of school, family, and community partnership will become pervasive rather than exceptional. For that reason I want to offer an eight-part prescription for action, hoping to catch the attention of those educators, parent leaders, and policy

makers at all levels who are ready to begin to walk the walk of partnership that they now talk.

First, a caution for educators: if partnership programs are to be worth the effort, time, and money that they require, they must be able to demonstrate in tangible ways how they contribute to increasing the social and academic development of children in school. This means that programs must be 1) carefully designed, with the participation of all those affected by them; 2) based whenever possible on research evidence; 3) faithfully executed; 4) objectively evaluated; and 5) sustained over time.

Now a caution for partnership advocates: partnerships with families and communities are not the whole answer to school reform that is geared toward equity. They are not a substitute for well-trained, well-paid, and effective teachers and administrators; good books and materials; diverse instructional strategies; commitment to high standards of academic content; good, varied tools for assessing student achievement; ample time for student learning; and safe, orderly, and well-managed schools. Partnership is not the whole answer, but it is one important strategy for school reform.

SEVEN RECOMMENDATIONS

Here is my prescription for action. It consists of seven recommendations followed by a few brief comments.

1. *Teachers and principals.* Teachers and principals make or break any effort to bridge the traditional separation of

schools from the families and communities they serve. Yet plans for partnerships are often developed with little or no teacher input. Principals tell teachers, "Just do it." And principals often receive the same kind of message from the central office. This top-down management dooms the partnership effort from the start.

For years I have been saying that teacher education institutions need to teach future teachers and administrators about the ways that families and the community can benefit them and their students. Prospective educators must be prepared to work positively with parents and with community agencies and institutions. Not many teacher educators are taking this advice yet, but they remain an important part of both the problem and the solution. Educators in training learn through instruction and experience that partnerships with parents and community agencies need not diminish their professional expertise or status but in fact can enhance them. Once on the job, the novice educator needs positive encouragement to engage in the desired partnership activities.

Principals and senior teachers can do much to encourage other teachers to take an active interest in making the connections between learning in the classroom and learning at home and in the community. Teachers can provide guidance to families on setting realistic expectations, monitoring and helping with homework, limiting TV time, and selecting appropriate books and learning materials. To increase learning time for children, teachers can develop materials for families to use with their children at home, or they can use materials that have already been developed.

Principals and teachers together can establish new approaches to parent/teacher conferences that are designed to build trust and to encourage joint efforts to increase student learning. This can happen if such conferences are held at least twice a year for half an hour and are focused on student work. The traditional fleeting parent/teacher conferences during open houses usually accomplish little.

Teachers and principals need incentives and support to make these kinds of things happen — for example, help in the school from a paid parent coordinator, public recognition, credit for their efforts when pay increases or promotion decisions are made, protection from above when

their efforts create problems. And, of course, teachers and administrators must be involved significantly in planning the partnership approaches to be used.

2. *Democratic principles.* Successful partnerships require attention to the essential elements of the democratic process. These elements include recognizing different interests and respecting all participants regardless of color, religion, or educational status. Various methods of conflict resolution — mediation, negotiation, and compromise — are also necessary aspects of the democratic process.

Since partnership also means power sharing, schools and districts need to find realistic and workable ways to involve parents and other community representatives in planning, establishing policy, and making decisions regarding mainline educational issues. A good starting point would be to take corrective action on many of the existing mandated mechanisms of advisory committees and school site councils.

These bodies haven't realized their potential and are often characterized by tokenism, which can breed cynicism or apathy.

3. *Reach out to where the parents are.* There is good evidence that schools that are friendly and welcoming to family members have an easier time creating good, workable partnership programs. Many elements have been shown to contribute to creating such an atmosphere: a parent center as a symbol of welcome and a hub of activity; good and user-friendly communication in person and on the phone; good after-school and summer programs focused on academics and conducted in cooperation with community organizations; social activities that are fun and help to create positive relationships between teachers and families; programs that link families to needed health and social services; and clean and well-decorated offices, halls, and classrooms.

However, making schools attractive and friendly is not enough if educational equity and high standards are the goals. The school and parent leaders must reach out to those who are thought of as hard to reach — those who almost never show up at the school. Three approaches have proved successful in responding to this challenge.

First, schools recruit and train parents and other community residents to visit homes to offer information about the schools, about the new academic standards, and about

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how families can support children's learning at home. These volunteers also give families referrals to social service agencies that can help them with problems of health, housing, jobs, and child care.

Second, teachers, principals, and parent coordinators reach parents and other family members who are least connected to the school by finding them in community settings — bodegas, supermarkets, beauty shops, churches, mosques, fast-food restaurants — rather than waiting for them to come to the school. The point is to go to where the people are, talk to them, listen to them, and pay attention to their concerns and priorities.

Third, the school makes arrangements with health and social service agencies to attract parents by offering them services their family members need and then to communicate with them about educational matters. The cooperating agencies can be based at the school site, at their own offices, or in other community settings.

4. *Grassroots activism.* I see a revival of parent activism as a key element in rebuilding support for public schools and persuading more schools and districts to make the necessary changes so that all of their students can achieve higher academic standards. Activism means collective work by independent grassroots organizations that support public schools but are free to evaluate and monitor them —



"When your teacher scolds you, you should never, ever say, 'Quack, quack, water off a duck's back.'"

to criticize as well as to praise, cajole as well as comfort, and pressure as well as promote their schools. Such outside-the-school activism usually comes at the initiative of parents and community organizations themselves, not from educators or government agencies.

There are some stirrings along these lines. The best example may be the Boston Parent Organizing Network, which is housed at the Institute for Responsive Education (www.responsiveeducation.org) but is an independent group consisting of several grassroots community organizations (not limited to parents). Members of the network are seeking to be supportive of school reform efforts in the Boston schools but are also prepared to push for their own reform agendas. Local chapters of Parents for Public Schools (www.parents4publicschools.com) are also examples of revived parent activism.

5. *Both choice and voice.* Parent choice is a legitimate and important part of the process of empowering parents and improving schools, as is giving parents an effective voice in decision making in the schools. I recommend the development of as many reasonable opportunities for choice as possible, but only within the public school framework. Charter schools, magnet and alternative public schools, schools-within-schools, cross-district transfers, and early access to postsecondary education all offer reasonable and potentially useful choices to students and their families.

For parent choice within public school systems to be genuinely empowering, public officials and independent parent and community organizations must take special steps to inform families about what they need to know in order to make informed choices. This is especially true for low-income and minority families, who may not be in the usual information loops. If such steps are not taken, parent choice can make the educational gaps even wider. In addition, I believe that parent choice programs must be conducted within strictly enforced guidelines about admission requirements so that they do not contribute to segregation by race or class or rule out special-needs students.

6. *Increased family responsibility.* With parent power comes increased parent responsibility. In the best interests of closing the huge gaps between white and minority children and between middle-class students and those with lower social status, it is important to spread the burden of responsibility to the home and the community as well as to the school. But assigning more responsibility to low-income and minority families smacks of "blaming the victim" unless it is backed up with major efforts to help these families meet their responsibility for rearing and educating their children.

All families occasionally need help with child rearing — some more than others. Those who live in economically depressed situations face myriad problems. Strong family support services can help. These can be linked to the schools or provided by community agencies. Parent education and access to adult literacy, English as a second language, or General Education Development (GED) programs can also be useful in some situations. Providing good alternative placements for that small minority of children whose home conditions are unacceptable should be seen as part of the community's responsibility for the healthy development of children.

Related to this recommendation is the urgency of offering support, information, and education for families who need help in fostering their children's healthy and socially productive behavior. Public and private community agencies and organizations, including religious institutions and employers, have a vital role to play in family support, parent education, and other interventions to strengthen the capacity of many families to do the right thing by their children. Schools should be active partners with these agencies in this complicated but vital matter.

7. *Linking school reform and community development.* School success and community success are linked. Public schools are seldom able to be much better than their neighborhoods and surrounding communities. Neighborhoods and communities are seldom able to stay healthy and attractive without good schools.

Linking school and community development is important because we know that educational progress for the have-nots requires progress in the areas of access to affordable housing, good health care, jobs, transportation, safe streets, and reduction of alcohol and drug abuse. The fragmented planning and decision making and the competing bureaucracies that characterize local, state, and national government agencies that deal with these matters make coordination difficult. But Model Cities in the late 1960s and early 1970s and the Clinton Administration's empowerment zones are steps in the right direction.

Community agencies and organizations, parent groups, and school boards and school officials can demand more coordination as soon as they know that decisions are to be made that will affect schools and their neighborhoods. Such coordination would be appropriate, for example, when selecting sites for new schools, playgrounds, and parks; deciding on transportation routes; closing or opening business and service agencies; setting rules on the location of bars and adult entertainment shops; allocating public safety and public health resources; and making zoning decisions.

Linking schools and community development will work best when the relationship between schools and community organizations and agencies is really an exchange, not a one-way street (as it is when community groups or businesses do things for the schools). It is clear to most people that communities have much to offer schools; it is not always so obvious that schools have much to offer the community in addition to educating children. Schools can provide access to their physical facilities (such as computer labs, gyms, meeting rooms, playgrounds); teachers and administrators can offer their talents and skills to the community; students can serve the community in service projects; and schools can offer computer and Internet education to community people who have been left behind by today's technology revolution. Schools can be a spark for community activities.

Schools are also employers and can favor local residents in hiring; they are purchasers of goods and services and can favor local merchants and tradesmen; they are neighbors and can join in neighborhood projects such as crime watch, clean-up campaigns, neighborhood gardens, food banks, and cooperative purchasing.

Will any of these things happen? Or, five years down the road, will partnership advocates such as I still be wringing our hands and asking, Why are so few districts and schools responding to what seem like obvious and relatively easy strategies?

Will parents and community forces become more assertive in demanding to be more fully engaged in reforming schools toward high standards for all children? Will tens of thousands of educators (rather than hundreds) be responding to the real pressures of high standards and high-stakes testing by more fully engaging families and the community as partners?

My recommendations add up to a plea for changing the culture of schools so that partnership is a way of life that offers benefits to all who are engaged and becomes a tradition rather than a funded project. Partnership will thrive and succeed in a school and community culture that is hospitable to it, when all the partners have both power and responsibility. It will thrive when the action is both individual and collective and vitally alive in the school, in students' homes, and in the community. The ideas I have presented here will be viable to the extent that efforts to build partnerships are seen as facilitating strategies to make other elements of school reform more successful.

1. Samuel Casey Carter, *No Excuses: Seven Principals of Low-Income Schools Who Set the Standards for High Achievement* (Washington, D.C.: Heritage Foundation, 2000), p. 10. 