

Partners in Transformation

Effective parent engagement is a marriage of parent and school priorities that can transform a school. Too often, however, parent involvement is driven by accountability issues such as governance councils and parent conferences, or by fundraising efforts. Parent involvement frequently is defined by the needs of the system.

When we address whole school reform, we know that policy has little chance of changing the culture. In “Choosing the Wrong Drivers for Whole System Reform” (2011), Michael Fullan identifies four “right” or “lead” drivers for achieving transformative goals: capacity building, group quality, focus on instruction, and systemic strategies. These drivers work interactively, and one action can integrate more than one driver.

The Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD) shows how these drivers can work effectively in building transformative parent-school partnerships. In July 2010, the LAUSD Board of Education passed the Parents as Equal Partners Resolution identifying five goals of parent engagement:

1. Provide a welcoming environment for families and invite them to participate as equal partners in the education of their children;
2. Provide parents opportunities to acquire necessary information, knowledge, and skills to support their children’s education at home and at school;
3. Engage parents in the school’s volunteer program so they can participate in supporting school-wide, classroom, and parent involvement activities;
4. Respond to parent concerns and/or complaints to ensure a child’s educational needs are met; and
5. Comply with LAUSD, state, and federal parent engagement requirements.

If parents are truly valued as equal partners in their child’s education, we must systematically build our competency around partnering with them, developing collaborative cultures that include them as lifelong learners.

In 2014-2015, the District’s Intensive Support and Innovation Center will pilot the School Culture and Climate Rubric. The rubric is aligned to Fullan’s right drivers. Examples from the five goals of parent engagement are listed under each driver followed by implementation examples from my 15 years as an administrator at Plummer Elementary School, where we transformed one of the lowest performing schools in California into a Title I High Achieving and a California Distinguished School.

Plummer Elementary built five broad committees: Technology, Parent/Community (P/C) Relations, Special Events, Safety, and Awards. The P/C Relations Committee was pivotal in the school’s implementation of an effective parent engagement plan.

Capacity Building

Capacity building is driven by motivation and competency. Some elements of the rubric include:

1. All school spaces foster a welcoming environment;
2. The Family and Community Engagement Team (FEAT) guides efforts for the family engagement plan and collaboration with community partners;
3. The volunteer program is parent-driven;
4. Trust is maintained because the rights of all stakeholders are respected; and
5. Parents are partners in the monitoring process.

For example, the P/C Relations Committee facilitated the writing of the school discipline plan, expanded resources for parents within the community, and maintained the parent center.

Group Quality

Rather than relying on individual efforts, creating a school culture of learning builds the capacity of the whole through social capital. Examples from the rubric are:

1. Planned interactions in a positive environment;
2. Collaboration and planning among the FEAT team guides implementation of a highly effective parent engagement plan;
3. The volunteer program is a positive model for school support; and
4. Respectful and informative interactions.

The P/C Relations Committee’s responsibilities included recruiting, organizing, and training volunteers and working with the Special Events Committee to provide outreach for all activities, including back-to-school night, family math night, and a volunteer tea. The P/C Relations Committee also arranged fundraising evenings at local restaurants that

brought families and staff together in informal settings.

Focus on Instruction

The rubric called for teachers to consistently recruit parents to attend sessions where parents learn how to partner with their teacher and support their child's learning. It also required the FEAT team to consistently offer targeted opportunities for parents, and a consistent system of matching parent skills with the intent of enhancing the learning climate.

In searching for parent training opportunities and expanded classes, the P/C Relations Committee built a relationship with Youth Policy Institute for a computer lab for parents and a relationship with Van Nuys Community Adult School to provide parenting, technology, and English classes on our campus. Kindergarten teachers hosted Friday morning read-a-louds with adult partners for each child. First-grade teach-

ers hosted afterschool mini-lessons (20-minute sessions) for parents several times a year. Third-grade teachers hosted a breakfast flash card party for learning fact families.

Systemic Strategies

The rubric stresses the need for parent engagement to be consistent, planned, targeted, and coordinated. Specific examples include outreach and communication, parent education and budget, assignment of parent volunteers based on skills and annual assessment of volunteer program impact, defined parent concern process and follow-through, and adhering to parent/community mandates with fidelity.

At Plummer Elementary, the P/C Relations Committee maintained a master calendar of parent/community events and opportunities, facilitated outreach, and provided the infrastructure for P/C interactions.

Other ideas for systemic solutions

include training the office, the front line, on a monthly basis so that staff can answer most requests for information, and publishing a list of persons responsible for specific tasks, so the office staff knows to whom they need to refer calls and concerns.

If parents are truly valued as equal partners in their child's education, we must systematically build our competency around partnering with them, developing collaborative cultures that include them as lifelong learners. Almost every parent is present the first day of kindergarten. Fullan's lead drivers help to cultivate and maintain parents' first-day excitement instead of tamping it down with accountability policies. ■

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