Parents as Partners

Use the continuous improvement process to foster equity

By James Hilton Harrell

"As a white parent in P.S. 199, I am not part of your constituency—my family, my children," a parent charged after Chancellor Richard Carranza tweeted his intent to increase the diversity of the Upper West Side Manhattan middle school last year. The controversy served as a flashpoint for a crucial education debate: How do we integrate our schools? And how do we get schools to be equitable and inclusive when these conversations can get so emotional?

School-family partnerships have been widely researched to determine the most effective models. In *Beyond the Bake Sale* (2007), Anne T. Henderson and her co-authors categorize schools along a continuum of interaction as "fortresses," "come-if-we-call," "open-door," and "partners." Fortress schools signal "We don't want you here" to parents and family members. Come-if-we-call schools want involvement only when they ask for it. Open-door schools welcome parents and family members but they include an undertone that the educators know best. And partner schools explicitly and implicitly welcome families to share in and define the success of their students.

Transitioning to a partnership school is easier said than done, especially if your school serves a diverse community. To lead such an effort, principals must be aware of how diversity, equity, and inclusiveness interact at their schools. With an eye toward continuous improvement, leaders can shift school culture to ensure an equitable and inclusive environment.

A Constant Dialogue

Diversity, inclusiveness, and equity are in a constant dialogue with one another. As we plan for partnerships, it's important to understand the distinctions among these concepts and focus on the areas that make the most sense for our

school community. Here are their working definitions:

Diversity is about who's in the room. To engage parents, various social identities must be represented in your partnership planning and work. Important metrics to note include gender, race, ethnicity, age, ability, and class.

Inclusiveness is how we set the agenda. Inclusive family engagement means all families' perspectives are valued. An inclusive school is one that has intentional and ongoing engagement with diverse family communities.

Equity is the outcome. The National Equity Project says equity lies in removing the predictability of success or failure associated with any social or cultural factor. In school settings, this means viewing all families as equal partners in the work of educating children, and seeing all as having expertise on their children.

Toward Continuous Improvement

Challenges surrounding family partnerships will be unique to each school community. Though there isn't a one-size-fits-all answer, schools can use continuous improvement to assess the system that produces current outcomes and to measure progress. The continuous improvement process has four steps:

1. Planning. In the planning phase, a leader creates a vision and goal. Is the leader working to get more parents in the room (diversity)? Is she seeking to ensure that all parents have agency in school governance (inclusiveness)? Or is the school working to ensure parents experience authentic success (equity)?

Once you narrow the focus, you can create activities that make a positive impact on the goal. One elementary school I worked with noticed a lack of communication between teachers and the school's growing Arab population. To address this, the principal had Syrian food delivered during a professional development day to discuss important cultural factors with parents.

2. Doing. With planning complete, it's time to implement the tasks. To ensure success, you must serve as a project manager. Empower others to complete tasks; one person can't do everything, and the importance of distributed leadership cannot be understated.

3. Studying. Leaders must also establish metrics to measure success. Reflect upon and evaluate your actions to come up with the best next steps. Simply put, no one knows your context and school better than you and your team.

Build upon your strengths to ensure that the discourse with families is positive and productive, and remember your "why." The National Center for Family and Community Connections With Schools says that when "schools, families, and community groups work together to support learning, children tend to do better in school." Simply put, this work will positively impact your students' lives.

4. Acting. The final phase in continuous improvement is to act on the insights you gained. If your reflection discovered that parents don't come to meetings because they can't speak English, for example, your revised plan should include funding for translation services. The acting phase also provides an avenue to demonstrate your thought process and invite further dialogue.

Building family partnerships is tough. But by applying the continuous improvement process and clarifying diversity, equity, and inclusiveness goals, leaders can create schools where power, responsibility, and success are shared. P

James Hilton Harrell is a transformation consultant at WestEd.