



NCPIE Update

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A Look at IRE's Efforts to Help Establish 5 New Parent Resource Centers in the District of Columbia



The December 2005 NCPIE meeting was a time of fellowship as the parent involvement community came together for the annual NCPIE Holiday breakfast – a special treat brought to us by our hosts at NEA. It was also a chance to hear from the Institute for Responsive Education (IRE) and their efforts to help the District of Columbia Public Schools (DCPS) on the establishment of parent/family resource centers.

An Overview of the Project

Strategic Goal Three, Strategy Two, of the DCPS Declaration of Education states that DCPS will establish “a new office devoted to parent involvement and five new parent resource centers that will help parents become more active and effective advocates for their children.” This declaration is two-fold: (1) the establishment of an office within DCPS administration devoted to parent involvement and (2) the establishment of parent centers in five district wards.

IRE, located in Cambridge, MA, has more than thirty years experience in building partnerships among schools, families, and communities to enable high quality educational opportunities for all children. They were contracted by DCPS to facilitate the implementation of DCPS' Strategic Goal Three. Specifically, IRE was contracted to:

- Conduct listening conferences with parents, DCPS staff and community members
- Coordinate the planning process and assist DCPS with the convening of a workgroup to oversee the development of the centers
- Facilitate parent, youth, and community generated focus groups
- Facilitate the development of an overall work plan with timelines
- Create a framework for centers based on the desires (hopes & dreams) of parents expressed in focus group sessions

As a part of its methodology for this project, IRE used *action research*. With this approach to the scope of work the individuals who are closest to the children's needs— parents, administrators, teachers, and community members -- work together to increase the effectiveness of partnerships they design. Thus, beginning in July 2005, IRE conducted informal listening sessions with approximately 62 DCPS staff, parents, and community organization representatives. The sessions were a mix of one-on-one and small group sessions at the DCPS central office and in Wards 1, Ward 7 and Ward 8. The purpose of the listening sessions was to identify key

stakeholders, review current policies and practices relating to parent/family engagement and to begin to engage stakeholders in the planning process.

In October 2005, formally organized focus groups were conducted in English and Spanish in the three wards with translators to facilitate the participation of Vietnamese- and Amharic-speaking parents. Ninety parents participated in a total of eight focus groups across the three wards over a three day period. The objective of the focus groups was to ascertain what kinds of supports and programming the centers should include and how the centers should be structured. IRE posed three questions:

1. What supports do parents/families need to help children succeed in school?
2. How would you design the centers to serve parents?
3. What are your expectations for DCPS?

A survey was developed and translated into Spanish and Vietnamese as a tool to solicit input from a broader constituency. Surveys were distributed in Ward 1 through community based organizations that serve immigrant families and a random sampling was obtained by surveying parents in the lobby of DCPS central office. A total of 72 surveys were completed.

Armed with this information, IRE then offered DCPS the following recommendations for implementation of this strategic goal at the district level and as it relates to the implementation of parent/family resource centers:

District Level Recommendations

- 1. DCPS must immediately move to formally establish “the office devoted to parent engagement” as described in the Declaration of Education, to coordinate, manage and provide oversight to the district-wide parent engagement initiative with clear policies for implementation and accountability.***
 - DCPS must designate a dedicated staff person who is part of the superintendent’s central leadership team to coordinate, manage and provide oversight for the implementation and operation of family engagement initiative. This individual must be experienced in building partnerships with family and community.
 - A task force should be convened to assess the current structures and policies and to develop a detailed action plan for the implementation of the “office devoted to parent engagement,” with timelines and lines of accountability. This task force should also make recommendations for policy to support implementation and accountability for the parent engagement initiative.
- 2. DCPS must develop a plan that effectively promotes the vision, goals and expectations for parent engagement throughout the district and out to parents, families and the broader community.***
 - A comprehensive communications plan must be developed to ensure consistency and fidelity of implementation of the family engagement initiative. All staff at all levels must be able to articulate the vision, goals and expectations for family engagement and have a clear understanding of their role.
 - The communications plan must also include a strategically designed mix of messages and outreach methods that detail the district’s vision and plan to parents and the community at-large.
- 3. A comprehensive professional development plan aligned with the goals of the district’s parent engagement initiative must be developed for all staff at all levels.***

- Professional development must focus on transforming the culture of DCPS, at all levels, to one which welcomes parents and community and engages them as partners.
- Professional development must include improving customer service at all levels and provide school staff with the skills and strategies to engage parents as partners.

Recommendations for Parent/Family Resource Centers

In the development of these centers one point must remain prominent: “The primary role of the centers must be to connect parents and families to DCPS in support of their children’s learning.” That being the case, IRE offers one Planning Process Recommendation:

- 4. Parents must be at the center of the planning process for the centers. Both the central work group and local planning teams in each ward must engage parents as team members.***

Framework Recommendations

- 5. The parent/family resource centers must be places where parents are welcomed and respected as partners, with staff that reflects the cultural and linguistic diversity of the parents, families and communities served.***

- Staff must include advocates that serve parents, assisting them with the resolution of issues and working to empower them to be more effective advocates for their children.
- Staff must be trained to view their roles as “border crossers” providing connections between families and schools.
- Proposed Staffing Configuration: 1 Director, 1 Resource Specialist, 2 Advocates, Staff Assistant
- All staff must be cross-trained, to ensure that each staff member has a clear understanding of the basics of each position in order to provide the most effective service for parents.

- 6. Programming in every center must minimally focus on three key areas; connecting parents/families to schools, providing support and advocacy for parents and their children, and building parent capacity to support student success.***

- Centers must assist parents in navigating school bureaucracy and serve as advocates to ensure timely and effective resolution of issues.
- Centers must serve as a resource for accurate DCPS information and access to DCPS and community resources.
- Centers must provide services such as workshops, support groups and training that serve to increase parent efficacy. These services should connect parents to teachers and schools in ways that improve outcomes for children.
- Centers should also incorporate learning opportunities that build individual capacity for parents such as adult literacy, ESL, GED and computer literacy.

- 7. DCPS must ensure that the centers have locations that have adequate space with the equipment and technology infrastructure needed to support programming. Locations must be located in areas that provide the greatest access for parents.***

- Centers must be multi-purpose spaces located in the neighborhood with access to public transportation. The centers must have access to:

Resource/Reception areas	Classroom Space
Kitchenette (coffee pot, microwave, refrigerator, hotplate)	Computer Lab
Private Conference space with telephone	Meeting Space/childcare areas
Comfortable furniture as well as chairs and tables	Restroom facilities

- Each center must also have:

Staff Computers connected to DCPS	Telephones
Computers for Parent use w/Internet connections	Copiers & Fax Machine
Simultaneous Interpretation Equipment	Audiovisual Equipment

8. *The parent/family resource centers must have a level of autonomy that will ensure that the centers serve the best interest of parents and actively engage parents and the broader community in center governance and oversight.*

- The proposed governance structure must be a partnership between parents and DCPS which includes a “steering committee” of parents, community and DCPS staff will provide joint oversight and responsibility for setting the direction for programming and hiring staff.
- The steering committee will be responsible for engaging parents and community in the planning process and producing an annual report to the parents and community.

IRE will continue to facilitate the planning process for the establishment of the parent/family resource centers in conjunction with DCPS’s Office of Communications and Public Information. The goal is to open the first three parent/family resource centers in late spring 2006 with the remaining two centers coming in the fall of 2006.

A central workgroup has been convened with representation from parents and community members from Wards 1, 7 and 8 together with DCPS staff from key departments and the Executive Director of the DC Education Compact. The role of this work group will be to use the recommendations in the report to create a framework for establishing a process for local design teams to develop plans for the first year of operation.

The success of this endeavor will be contingent upon the development of a clear parent engagement agenda by DCPS. To that end, IRE is committed to provide continuing support, facilitation and technical assistance to establish the five parent/family resource centers as described in the DCPS Declaration of Education.

(Source: Report to the Superintendent of the District of Columbia Public Schools on The Establishment of Parent/Family Resource Centers, December 9, 2005)