



NCPIE Update

A Publication of the National Coalition for Parent Involvement in Education

Jan. 2005

Inside this Issue:

- Survey on Family Involvement in Alexandria City Public Schools
- NCPIE's Continuing Column: *Spotlight on the Evidence*
- New Parent Involvement Resources and Research
- Calendar Year 2005 Meeting Schedule

Listening to Families and Faculty: A Report on Family Involvement in the Alexandria City Public Schools

The December Meeting was both festive and informative. The Alexandria (VA) City Public Schools (ACPS), gave an overview of ACPS's latest family involvement initiative. If you missed the meeting, you missed a great meal and informative presentation. We've provided the highlights for you below.

In January of 2002, ACPS asked itself a few questions:

How can ACPS help its parents educate their children?

What do ACPS families need to be more involved in their children's education?

How can ACPS best communicate with families?

What resources do ACPS families need to educate their children?

Those questions and the desire to have them answered led ACPS Superintendent, Rebecca Perry and ACPS Family and Community Involvement Coordinator, Karen Parker Thompson to enlist the help of Anne Henderson, KSA Plus Communications, and Customer Care Measurement and Consulting Firm to develop a survey to increase family involvement.

A customer satisfaction approach was used to discover what aspects of school-family relationships are most related to family and faculty satisfaction with their school and with ACPS. First, KSA Plus conducted 22 focus groups. Using the focus group findings, a survey instrument was developed. The goal was to use the information obtained from the focus groups and survey to develop effective family involvement strategies and programs that empower parents and support students.

About ACPS

ACPS is a densely populated urban district of 10,077 students from 88 countries who speak 66 different languages. 51 % of ACPS students receive free or reduced lunch. The district is 43% African and African American, 23% White, 27% Hispanic and less than 7% Asian. The district has a 33% mobility rate with exit survey rates showing housing cost as the main reason why families relocate out of the district. ACPS operates on a modified school calendar with 4 parent resource centers. Every school has a family involvement coordinator.

The Focus Groups:

In January of 2002, ACPS hired KSA Plus Communications to facilitate 22 focus group conversations with approximately 100 parents, teachers, students, and community members. Each conversation was with a distinct group:

- Parents: Hispanic, Middle Eastern, White, African American parents; parents of special education students, and parents of elementary, middle, and high school students
- Teachers: Elementary, middle and high school teachers
- Students: High School students
- Community: Staff of the Alexandria Juvenile Court and members of community groups.

The focus group findings identified Assets, Challenges, Barriers, and Ideas for Improvement by ACPS.

Focus Group Finding: Assets and Challenges

The diversity of ACPS was praised across the focus groups. However, teachers identified it as both an asset and a challenge. Additional challenges identified include:

- How ACPS schools vary in quality and practice
- Inconsistency of expectations for students between and even within schools
- The lack of a specific procedure for addressing parent concerns

Focus Group Finding: Barriers

Parent and teacher focus groups identified the following barriers to parent involvement:

- Cost of Living
- Cultural Disconnect
- Poor Communications
- Fear Factor—Defined as the fear or intimidation parents sometimes parents feel when they go to a school
- The PTA In-Crowd Syndrome

Focus Group Finding: Ideas for Improvement

- Develop Better Communications
- Keep Parents and students better informed about student progress, including early warnings
- Create schools that are equally strong choices for parents and children
- Reach out to more families
- Improve parent-teacher relationships

The Survey

The survey was then sent to every teacher and school administrator and every family in the system.

The survey asked families and faculty about their views on:

- The teacher-parent relationship to support children's progress
- The school environment in learning and decision-making
- Two-way communication and problem solving
- The level of satisfaction with their school and with ACPS

In addition, the survey also asked families how well their complaints and concerns are handled and asked teachers what challenges they faced in involving families. Additionally, it asked families and teachers to tell, in their own words, that they thought was working to engage families at their schools, and what they thought would help.

Survey Results

ACPS worked with Customer Care Measurement and Consulting Firm to develop a survey instrument. In April of 2003, surveys were placed in elementary students' weekly folders and mailed to the home of middle and high school families. Faculty surveys were distributed at each school. The survey response rate from families was 20% and the faculty response rate was 23%.

Key Survey Findings

Finding #1: Three Critical Areas for Families

1. Being treated fairly and with respect;
2. Being pleased with the quality of their children's learning and communications with the school; and,
3. Feeling that ACPS or the school responds well to their problems and concerns.

Finding #2: Two Critical Areas for Faculty

1. Feeling that their school is working as partners with parents; and,
 2. Being pleased with their school's communication with parents.
- Teachers also identified three major *obstacles* to involving families in their schools:

- Engaging parents in homework;
- Encouraging parents to take ownership of their children's behavior and learning; and,
- Communicating with parents who don't speak English.

Finding #3: How to Involve More Families

Voices From Families: On the whole, parents want more communication and outreach from school, while faculty want parents to be more accountable. Families that participated in the survey shared ideas on what they thought schools should do to get parents more involved.

- Give more notice of events and activities, schedule them at times that are convenient to families, and take them into the community.
- Provide more information about children's progress and what they are learning—and notify parents when their children are doing well—not just when they are having problems.

- Make it easier for parents to be involved in middle and high school. Give parents more opportunities to connect with teachers one to one. For example: classroom meetings, more frequent conferences, social events on the team level, and visits to families at home.
- Show a greater level of care and concern by showing interest in children in positive ways instead of only highlighting negative concerns.
- Offer alternatives to PTA meetings, involve children in the programs, and have more fun and games for families. Have more workshops and activities on helping with homework, getting ready for college, funding college, improving math and reading skills and helping children explore career choices.
- Embrace families from different cultures. Offer more multicultural activities, provide translation and parent liaisons to communities with families in need, and improve the diversity of the PTA.

Voices from Faculty: Teachers agreed that there should be more activities for families, translation services for families who do not speak English, and workshops for parents on how to help their children. Additionally, faculty wanted to see:

- Requirements of more accountability and responsible behavior from families;
- Better communication with families, including finding alternate methods of communicating to phone, letter, or newsletter. Also communicating positive information about students and their performance; and
- More open and innovative techniques in working with families.

Next Steps

The ACPS plans to launch a campaign to raise family and faculty awareness of the critical importance of parent involvement and its impact on student achievement. Plans also include having district staff members meet with each school to go over the responses from their families and faculty and plan programs and activities based on the feedback. Finally, steps will be taken to align parent involvement initiatives with the ACPS Division Plan; including efforts to:

- Create workshops and a handbook for families to connect family involvement to student achievement and to learn how to navigate the school system;
- Plan innovative strategies to reach families and use school and community resources to assist with language translation;
- Provide professional development for faculty and families to improve communication and leadership skills, develop closer family school partnerships, and use cultural diversity as an asset in working with students and families; and,
- Develop a clear and accessible process for dealing responsively and quickly with families' concerns and problems.

ACPS will continue to survey families and faculty. The next survey will be conducted in Fall 2005 and will be compared to the baseline of this initial report. The goal for the Fall

2005 survey is for 90% of families and faculty to feel highly satisfied with both ACPS and their schools.

The full report, *Listening to Families and Faculty: A Report on Family Involvement in the Alexandria City Public Schools* will be on the ACPS website and the NCPiE website after January 30th, 2005: www.acps.k12.va.us and www.ncpie.org.



Spotlight on A New Wave of Evidence

A continuing column highlighting parent involvement research found in “A New Wave of Evidence: The Impact of School, Family, and Community Connections on Student Achievement” by Anne Henderson and Karen Mapp.

Because the role of community organizing in fostering school change is growing at a rapid rate across the country, we would like to spotlight a set of research reports on the subject of organizing to improve schools.

This month we have chosen to highlight a national report on community organizing: *Mapping the Field of Organizing for School Improvement: A Report on Education Organizing in Baltimore, Chicago, Los Angeles, the Mississippi Delta, New York City, Philadelphia, San Francisco, and Washington, DC* and its shorter companion piece, *Organizing for School Reform: How Communities Are Finding Their Voice and Reclaiming Their Public Schools*. These two reports are summarized on page 148 of *A New Wave of Evidence*. Because *Organizing for School Reform* is a summary of the longer piece of research, we will focus our overview chiefly upon *Mapping the Field of Organizing for School Improvement*.

Mapping the Field of Organizing for School Improvement offers community organizing groups ideas for organizing strategies and for evaluating their work. Researched and written with assistance from California Tomorrow, Designs for Change and Southern Echo, it looks at the work of 66 neighborhood groups in seven large cities and in the Mississippi Delta and provides a profile of the groups' shared characteristics and the common patterns in their struggles and successes. The groups surveyed include adult organizing groups, youth organizing groups and intergenerational groups.

After establishing a representative advisory committee, the committee developed a definition to guide the research. It was decided that the characteristics of a community-organizing group would include the following:

- 1) A base of parents, youth, and/or neighborhood residents who engage in collective action to address issues related to poor performance and inequities in local public schools and whose vision includes excellent and equitable public schools for all children.

- 2) A focus on winning concrete changes in school policy and practice using a variety of strategies including, but not limited to, mobilization, direct action, negotiation, training, and working in coalition.
- 3) A structure that supports and encourages democratic decision-making by group members in all aspects of the organization including decisions about issues, strategies, tactics, and vision.
- 4) A process for engaging in ongoing recruitment of new members and the development of leadership from within the membership base.
- 5) A commitment to building a strong and lasting organization dedicated to altering the power relations that lead to failing schools in low and moderate income neighborhoods and communities of color.

Survey respondents were identified based on referrals from initial respondents, which led to the participation of 66 organizing groups including, independent community organizations, local affiliates of national networks, youth organizations, advocacy groups, community development corporations and social service organizations with a school organizing component.

The National Context of Community Organizing for School Reform

The identification of an assortment of systemic inadequacies in America's schools has prompted many groups to get organized and address school reform issues. New groups are emerging out of older organizing groups. These older organizing groups have roots ranging from the labor movement's community mobilizations throughout the 1930's to the mobilization of black youth and African-American communities during the civil rights movements of the 1960's, to the organization of community development corporations and similar neighborhood housing and community improvement groups during the 1980's. They are now taking on education issues.

Other reasons for organizing around education issues abound. For instance local, state and national level education initiatives are creating new systems of accountability for schools and school systems that require increased student performance, yet fail to provide the necessary resources and supports necessary to increase the performance level. Thus, education reform groups, parents, youth and other community groups are demanding the resources necessary to meet the new standards.

Additional motivating factors that shape the national context of community organizing for school reform include issues such as:

- Privatization of public schools and vouchers
- Charter school growth and opportunities for community based organizations to be involved in their design
- Educational Equity
- Changing relationship between schools and Community-based organizations and the impact of after-school programming
- Local organizing groups and their push on the subject

An Overview of the Kinds of Groups Doing This Work

The characteristics of the 66 organizations included in this research study are:

- 67% define their membership as individual
- 33% define their membership as organizational—churches, block groups and neighborhood associations.
- Almost 20% of the organizations are faith-based.
- 20% say that, in addition to organizing, they provide services or advocate for service improvement,
- 80% concentrate on community organizing,
- 82% are multi-issue in focus; meaning that they concentrate on more than one specific organizing issue.

Slightly under a third of these school reform groups are independent of any larger group. The rest are sponsored or supported by larger organizations, including national and regional networks that have established and support direct action membership organizations as the primary vehicle to build leadership and take action.

Most of the organizations surveyed are not newcomers; 80% have been doing education organizing for at least four years. School reform experts estimate that in order to affect school change a 7-10 year time-frame is required, thus by those standards, the field is relatively new.

Budgets for these groups range from under \$100,000 to over \$500,000, although not all these funds directly support the education organizing. Most groups work with minimal staffs, and some rely entirely on the energy and dedication of volunteers. Multi-issue organizations are able to increase staffing of large events by drawing upon other organizers in their organizations.

Half the groups organize adults, while half do youth and intergenerational organizing.

Goals and Mission of These Groups

Many groups doing this work have broad goals such as winning more equitable schooling outcomes, providing more culturally sensitive schools, or transforming school cultures. Some groups also include broad improvements in the quality of education, such as more effective instruction in traditional schools or the creation of new small schools, as part of their goals. Many groups concentrate on the processes that might make schools more inclusive, responsive, participatory and effective, defining goals such as expansion of democratic decision-making in schooling, leadership development to equip parents or young people to participate in schooling discussions, and empowering youth and parents to fight for change.

Some mission definitions focus on creating the means to bring about schooling improvement or transformation, and specify, as goals, the building of sufficient power to enable disenfranchised constituencies and marginalized communities to improve their lives and their neighborhoods. Other groups define their mission more internally -- providing the development and training of the community leadership necessary to bring

about such transformation. Most groups include some commitment to democratizing society through their specific school reform work, but are organizing to achieve this transformation in different ways.

The neighborhood-based multi-issue organizations have broad social and political capital-development goals and missions. Many groups define specific community-building missions. All six groups in the Mississippi Delta fight racial inequity. Leadership development is another core goal. Immigrant groups work to create access to educational systems for their constituents. The point is that the goals of these 66 groups vary.

Strategic Questions for School Reform Organizing

1. Access- Access is often limited, and restricted, including physical access to facilities themselves as well as access to access to data about student outcomes.
2. Legitimacy-Because schools and districts are often isolated from other community institutions, a community group may find that the school's administrators and staff are either ignorant of or dismissive of the group's experience, achievements and capacity.
3. Accountability- Several organizing groups have targeted their district's political structure as the ultimate accountability entity.
4. Developing Effective Strategies- The data suggests that experienced groups use a variety of strategies to press for improvement, alternating between inside and outside approaches, and confrontation or collaboration.

How groups address and resolve the critical questions of access, legitimacy and accountability depends on their specific political contexts and the history of their organizing efforts. Groups with more experience draw on a range of strategies: they use outside approaches to build pressure for reform and inside approaches to develop important allies. They develop alliances with other organizations to help build their power and provide them with access to research and data. And they are combining local organizing with working to bring about system-wide change, often as part of coalitions.

What Groups are Accomplishing

Education reform and organizing groups are building local organizational power and capacity to back up their constituents' demands, and many are achieving striking success in their school improvement campaigns. All groups studied note the development of new forms of capacity among their constituencies, including: leadership skills, social and political capital, and deliberative community space. As a result, young people and parents have been empowered to take on leading roles in their organizations and their schools.

Creating deliberative community space in which parents, young people or residents can work together to fight for change is a critical form of capacity-building. Often these organizing groups provide the only local, democratic and inclusive space in which young people and adults can articulate their voice and actualize their leadership skills.

The victories won by these organizing groups are aimed at creating high quality environments for learning, such as:

- Improved curriculum, instruction, staffing and professional development
- Opening of new small schools and charter schools;
- School climate improvements;
- Increased parent and youth participation in governance;
- Improved accountability, through replacing ineffective school and district leadership, and demanding new access and responsiveness from school staff and administrators,
- New programs and access to facilities, such as after school programs, mentoring and enrichment.

The data also suggest that community organizing groups play a significant and essential role in creating the political context in which change can happen – they focus schools on critical schooling issues, identify and build support for key interventions, and establish new and stronger accountability relationships between schools and communities. The role of community organizing in framing the discussion and keeping the focus on reform is important. Ultimately, effective community organizing – whether individual or faith-based, direct action or more collaborative – may depend on institutional interventions to produce instructional, organizational and cultural changes in schooling.

Organizing groups have developed the skills and capacity to engage parents and youth on schooling issues and make powerful demands for change. The groups described in this study are producing important social capital and community capacity outcomes that have long-term implications. They are increasing the ability of young people, parents and community residents to participate in local school reform efforts, and they are helping members to raise essential school performance questions forcefully and persistently. In the process, they are beginning to rebuild local democratic processes -- prying open closed, insular and defensive public institutions to greater scrutiny, participation and accountability.

Expanding the Field of Education Organizing

For the field of community organizing for education reform to expand, existing groups must be strengthened and new groups must be brought into the field. However, funding issues hamper the efforts of existing groups. Finding enough qualified staff and raising enough funds to hire organizers and pay them a living wage are chronic problems that undercut the effectiveness of education organizing. Complicating things further is the perception by most groups that the education arena is harder to navigate than other neighborhood issues. Though the field is expanding, there is room for and a need for many more groups to join in.

Recommendations

Efforts to expand and strengthen school reform organizing must overcome four key impediments:

1. Address the need for greater infrastructure and capacity among community groups organizing for school reform.
2. Invest in creating or expanding the efforts of local support organizations.
3. Develop better ways to measure the impact of community organizing for school reform.
4. Build understanding of and support for community organizing within the philanthropic community

The research report, *Mapping the Field of Education Organizing for School Improvement* can be found on the Institute for Education and Social Policy at New York University by visiting: http://www.nyu.edu/iesp/publications/cip/mapping/mapping_final_report.pdf

Parent Involvement and Engagement Resources & Meetings

Two New Guides for Parent Leaders

No Child Left Behind provides parents with access to a treasure trove of data about the performance of their local schools. But the information is useless if parents don't know where to get it or how to use it. Using Data as an Advocacy Tool, a new 8-page guide from KSA-Plus Communications, looks at how parent leaders can get smart about their school's data... identify which students are being well-served and which students are not ... and be able to ask the kinds of questions that lead to school improvement.

A 30-page Parent Leadership Starter Kit, also from KSA-Plus, includes everything a parent leader needs to know to become a more effective advocate and decision-maker, including quizzes, checklists, a guide to using data, and lots of useful advice about making use of the No Child Left Behind law. Both guides, plus other resources are available at: www.parents.ksaplus.com

New on the FINE Website

The Winter 2004/2005 issue of "The Evaluation Exchange" is now available online and in Acrobat format at: <http://www.gse.harvard.edu/hfrp/eval/issue28>.

The latest issue's topic is evaluating programs that promote families' involvement in children's learning and development. The new issue compiles the current knowledge base on family support and involvement programs and provides a continuous perspective on family processes surrounding children's learning and development, from a child's early years through adolescence. Articles in the issue address the challenges of evaluating family programs, including the need for conceptual clarity, methodological rigor,

accountability, and contextual responsiveness. In an interview with Jeanne Brooks-Gunn she reflects on breakthrough findings and new directions for research, evaluation, and practice in family-focused interventions. Rounding out the issue are examples of ongoing evaluations of parent leadership and organizing programs that are working to ensure that schools serve all children at high standards.

Also available on the FINE website is a new research digest titled: *Reading, Writing, and Reform in the Bronx: Lessons for Community Engagement in Schools*. Celina Su explores how five community-based education-organizing groups use various strategies to build trust and commitment among parents and teachers.

Don't forget to check the NCPIE web site periodically for new information on parent involvement at www.ncpie.org

Upcoming Meetings and Presentations:

The 2005 NCPIE Meeting calendar is set. Mark your calendars now!

NCPIE meetings will be held at NEA, 1201 16th Street, NW, Washington DC 20036. Our meetings are held from 9:00 a.m. to 12:00 noon. We try to have them on the last Wednesday of each month although as you will note, there are some exceptions. There is no meeting in July. Please put these dates in your calendar.

1/26/05	Conference Room B
2/23/05	State Dining Room
3/30/05	Conference Room B
4/27/05	Conference Room B
5/25/05	Conference Room B
6/29/05	Conference Room B
No meeting in July	
8/31/05	Conference Room B
9/28/05	Conference Room B
10/26/05	State Dining Room
12/14/05	Conference Room B