

# NCPIE UPDATE



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At the September 2008 NCPIE meeting, our guest presenters, Janice Chu Zhu and Hersilia Mendez from the National Technical Assistance Center for Community Schools (NTACCS) at the Children's Aid Society (CAS) talked about the CAS Community Schools model and its parent engagement best practices and leadership and advocacy training.

The Children's Aid Society was founded in 1853 to provide comprehensive services for the betterment of New York City's children and their families. The National Technical Assistance Center for Community Schools (NTACCS) was created in 1994, with the support of The Carnegie Corporation of New York, in response to the substantial interest generated by the first CAS community schools, and their demonstration of a unique collaboration between public schools and a comprehensive social service and youth development organization. As funders and others visited, the schools rapidly became exemplars of successful partnerships, and demand increased for information on establishing community schools, nationally and internationally. From the start, NTACCS has also actively contributed to advocacy efforts designed to advance the community schools movement and place this approach to educational improvement high on the nation's school reform agenda. As of today there are 1000 plus adaptations in the USA and over 14000 abroad. The Children's Aid Society operates 21 community schools in New York City, in partnership with the NYC Department of Education. Initiated in 1992, this work has won national and international recognition and numerous awards

At the Children's Aid Society's Community Schools no parent is expendable -- the schools welcome parents from every corner and their involvement is everybody's job. The Parent Involvement component has a central role within the larger context of the partnership with the schools and it is based on the premise that regardless of income, ethnicity or background students whose parents support, monitor, and advocate for their education are more successful in school; the CAS community school is a sort of three legged stool where parents, the school and CAS become equal partners to support this success.

The CAS schools are located in low income, mostly immigrant areas. Thus, the Parent Involvement Program is culturally responsive, strength-based, provides multiple entry points for meeting parents at their level as well as opportunities to engage with, support and strengthen the school. It also supports parent leadership and participation in the educational process, both at home and in the school. The services offered by CAS are available to parents, their children and extended families. The following are key components: parent coordinator, parent resource center/family room, workshops, classes and trainings, adult education, support groups, clubs, parent advisory councils, and advocacy efforts.

Though Parent Involvement is everybody's job, and parents are welcomed from every corner, the CAS schools have dedicated staff and dedicated space to facilitate this very hard task. The CAS parent coordinators are leaders with strong ties to the community, whose job is to help create a welcoming atmosphere for parents, linking them to the school and to community resources. Acknowledging diversity (both cultural and economic), they work in coordination with any organization or individual trying to involve parents, including the school administration, the teachers, the Parent Association and the Department of Education parent liaisons. They do parent and family outreach, with particular focus on those hard to reach; create volunteer and leadership opportunities; facilitate access to resources for parents in need; identify and organize advocacy opportunities; identify galvanizing issues; survey parents about program satisfaction, assess strengths and needs and staff the Family Room/Family Resource Center. Effective parent coordinators help overcome one of the major challenges to real parent involvement--unstable leadership. Parent coordinators need training, supervision and lots of support to do their job.

The Parent Resource Center/Family Room is a magnet space for parent interaction. It has a year round open door policy, from 8:00 AM to 9:30 PM. There parents find advocacy, volunteer and networking opportunities (such as cultural celebrations, trips, etc.); support groups and clubs (such as the grandparents, fathers or yoga clubs); trainings on parenting, health, the school system, the arts; vocational trainings (such as upholstery; home decorating, cake making, etc); driving lessons; as well as access/referrals to services; information about the CAS Adult Education Programs (such as computer, GED, English as a second language). The "Family Room" must be part of the domain of the principal and of the director; they must provide leadership and oversight to make sure that this room becomes a symbol of the school's respect for parents.

Recognizing that one of the keys to effective parenting is leadership, both at home and to influence their children's schooling, CAS launched the Ercilia Pepin Leadership Institute in 2007 with funding from the New York State Assembly. In June 2008 it gave certificates of participation to 400 parents. Participants most complete a set number of tracks in order to get the certifications; CAS is negotiating with some colleges to count the certification as credits.

Besides its mantras (“Parent involvement is everybody’s job”, “No parent is expendable” and “Parents must be welcomed from every corner of the school “) CAS has learned many lessons through its 16 years of involving parents and families in their children’s schooling, here are some key ones:

- 1) Meaningful communication is critical (written, verbal, subliminal)**
- 2) Respect, not condescendence, even the smallest disrespect has the potential to alienate them; parents must feel important; establish a trusting, respectful relationship with them.**
- 3) Parents are the best recruiters of other parents.**
- 4) Do not improvise; the key is planning.**
- 5) It is not an easy task, be patient... stick to it.**

To learn more about CAS go to their website: [www.childrensaidsociety.org/](http://www.childrensaidsociety.org/)

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