



Schools are for parents, too

Vision 2015 calls for engaging families in education

By ALISON KEPNER, The News Journal

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A father approaches his son's school. The only welcoming sign is one directing him to buzz the office to enter. Inside, he waits at a counter while a secretary finishes a personal call before asking, "What are you here for?"

Too often, that is a parent's school reception, said Anne T. Henderson, co-author of "Beyond the Bake Sale: The Essential Guide to Family/School Partnerships."

Research shows children do better in school when parents are involved.

But many educators struggle to get them to show up for teacher conferences, let alone take on more active roles.

The first step to engaging families is to do a better job receiving them, Henderson said: "[The] key to their decision to get more involved is whether they feel welcome and respected."

Wilmington mother Carol King-Ries agrees. "The impression you get when you walk in the front door as a parent is that you are not welcome. It's 'Where are you going? What are you doing here?'"

Teachers and administrators must engage families better if Delaware's school system is to become world-class, says the coalition of community leaders behind the \$100 million-plus Vision 2015 reform plan. They argue that once-a-year teacher meetings aren't enough.

Many parents want to be involved but don't know how, group leaders say, recommending training and support efforts for parents such as:

- Creating a one-page "performance dashboard" on schools for transparent information about student achievement, customer satisfaction and financial management.
- Offering leadership and advocacy training for families.
- Having family liaisons in schools.
- Establishing more online tools and outreach programs to inform parents about what children are learning.

Research supports

Family involvement is integral to student success, according to a 2001 U.S. Department of Education-commissioned study of children in low-income elementary schools. Research firms Westat and Policy Studies Associates found students had a 40 percent to 50 percent faster rate of improvement in reading and math if teachers met every family face to face, stayed in regular contact and sent materials home that parents could use to work with their children.

"When schools engage families both at school and support what they do at home ... children do better," Henderson said. "And there is a collective effect: Schools get better."

Kuumba Academy Charter School PTA President Zachary Cohen believes his daughter Elnora, 7, benefits from her parents' school involvement.

"We are showing her we are interested in what she's doing on a daily basis," he said. "We have an interest in her schoolwork and making sure she does well, not just academically but socially and emotionally."

Karen Mapp, a Harvard University lecturer and "Beyond the Bake Sale" co-author, said educators must reach out to all.

"Sometimes the parents who are better educated or have the opportunity to be engaged, they are the ones who always get tapped," she said. "You need to recruit families that are going to reflect the diverse families in your district."

Marie-Anne Aghazadian is executive director of the Parent Information Center of Delaware, a federally funded training and information program.

"The schools that are successful at involving parents are the schools that have realized that parents are equal partners and they have to consider them regardless of their education, their economic status," she said. "They have to look at them as people who can contribute and have a lot at stake."

And outreach shouldn't stop in elementary school.

Mapp suggests creating "family centers" in schools, places parents can go for information, to find out about homework and to participate in workshops. The idea is that parents who have a place to go may feel more comfortable coming.

Nonacademic school activities also could be used better.

"I have yet to see families not show up at sport events. If there is a school play or musical, families are there," she said. "But we don't embed learning activities. We have a lot of family engagement at the middle and high school level, we just don't use it."

Models here, elsewhere

Some Delaware schools already have programs to engage parents better. Laurel is one of five districts in the nation awarded a grant to implement a program by Yale University's Child Study Center.

The Comer Model engages parents as school volunteers and part-time employees in the office, library and classroom. It encourages schools to create governance teams made up of parents, teachers, support staffers and mental health workers. Together, they develop a school plan that sets goals for academic and social standards.

"We are constantly reminded that it's using consensus, collaboration and a no-fault problem-solving approach," Assistant Superintendent Linda Schenck said.

Delaware also has some statewide programs. The Rodel Foundation, which co-funded the Vision 2015 proposal, operates the Delaware Parent Leadership Institute. Participants develop plans to improve achievement, engage other parents and design sustainable programs.

Graduate Lisa Bryant said schools need parent leaders to speak for children and reach out to other parents. But educators need to do more to reach out to parents, too, she said: "Administrators should try unconventional ways to get to the parents. A lot of times there are programs offered to parents during the week, and a lot of parents work during the day or at night. Schools should offer things on the weekends."

That also was a recommendation of a two-year study in Maryland, where leaders aim to improve engagement. They found the "traditional manner of communication with parents is archaic and obsolete," Superintendent of Schools Nancy Grasmick said, noting that they also must use technology better and translate materials for non-English-speaking families.

Teachers also need to be trained to communicate.

"There are no courses as part of the whole preparation program that help teachers know how to do that," she said.

And educators must do a better job of making sure parents understand proposed reforms, Grasmick said. "We make assumptions that we send a piece of paper home in the backpack of a child and the parent has the depth of understanding."

Another model gaining popularity across the country has educators enact a "joining process," Henderson said. "You can't just have a one-time event or send fliers out to parents. ... You have to have an intentional process to engage families in your school community, to make them part of the team."

First is a welcoming component. "It's not just sending out invitations and putting a welcome mat at the door. It's doing home visits, getting in touch with local community groups ... recruiting parents to be buddies for other parents," she said.

Next is an honoring component, which recognizes what families already do. It also involves honoring cultures of families, seeing they are represented by posters, signs in other languages or class speakers.

Third is the connecting component, helping connect parents with other parents and the school staff as well as with what their children are doing in class.

Some changes already can be found here. Leaders at Lombardy Elementary in the Brandywine district made an effort to get parents to come to a fall open house, King-Ries said. PTA members gave children T-shirts if their parents came. They also offered baby-sitting.

"It doesn't seem like much, but it is very important for those who don't have family support," said King-Ries, a parent institute alumna.

"If you come into a school and it is a positive event or reason, then it is more likely that even when the situation is negative ... maybe when the teacher has to tell you something is going on with your child, you are more likely to come in."

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