



NEWSLETTER

Family/School Relationships: Relationships That Matter

WE OFTEN HEAR HOW IMPORTANT THE THREE R'S ARE IN DROPOUT PREVENTION: RIGOR, RELEVANCE, AND RELATIONSHIPS. LOOKING AT THE THIRD R, RELATIONSHIPS, WE NATURALLY THINK FIRST ABOUT THE CONNECTIONS TEACHERS AND OTHER SCHOOL PERSONNEL ARE MAKING WITH *STUDENTS*—ENGAGING THEM AT A PERSONAL LEVEL; KNOWING EACH OF THEM, THEIR INTERESTS, THEIR SPECIAL PROBLEMS, AND THEIR ASPIRATIONS; CARING ABOUT THEM AS INDIVIDUALS; AND THUS NOT LETTING THEM FALL THROUGH THE CRACKS. AND THIS IS EXTRAORDINARILY IMPORTANT. HOWEVER, THE NOTION OF RELATIONSHIPS *WITH PARENTS AND FAMILIES* IS EVERY BIT AS SIGNIFICANT IN ORDER TO SOLVE THE DROPOUT CRISIS. POSITIVE PERSONAL AND SCHOOL RELATIONSHIPS WITH PARENTS AND FAMILIES TRANSLATE INTO STRONG FAMILY ENGAGEMENT, ONE OF THE MOST POWERFUL INDICATORS OF STUDENT SUCCESS.



Family Engagement

This issue of the newsletter is focusing on Family Engagement, one of the National Dropout Prevention Center's Fifteen Effective Strategies. The evidence is solid on this strategy. What exactly is Family Engagement? Is it just getting parents to come to school functions? Sign report cards? Monitor homework? It is all these things, yet it is so much more. And when it is "so much more," the potential for improvement in students' attitudes, performance, and attendance is great.

In *Strategies to Help Solve Our School Dropout Problem*, authors Franklin Schargel and Jay Smink list ways that schools can support family involvement. (1) Overcome barriers so schools are welcoming and inviting to all families; (2) Respect educational backgrounds of family members and understand that many parents feel alienated from school from their own bad experiences; (3) Encourage active participation with extended hours, involving parents in decision making by extending school hours to weekends and evenings; (4) Visit families in their homes, showing parents their importance to the school; (5) Increase and broaden communication through the use of technology, finding ways to

bridge the digital divide; and (6) Develop a strong home-school-community base, knowing that partnerships are crucial to authentic parent/family engagement.

The authors also recommend ways that families can promote their own involvement, and that includes: (1) Show an interest in school policies and help their children understand them; (2) Participate in school functions for fun and educational purposes; (3) Provide a home where education is important, thus providing those high expectations so needed by students, especially those at risk; and (4) Volunteer in the school as often as possible. These are good starting points.

Elsewhere in the newsletter, we spotlight the book, *Beyond the Bake Sale*, a publication that delves into this issue of family engagement providing a wealth of ideas to foster this goal.

Carrie Rose of Sacramento, California, tells us about a partnership in her community where home visits have become increasingly successful. Learn how they have been able to overcome barriers by working together to foster this effective practice.

Anne Henderson brings our attention to the roles that parents play at

the secondary level, and how a high school in New York City has provided the supports parents need to be there for their older children as they progress through high school. With their families at their sides, students develop aspirations for postsecondary education.

Hedy Chang brings to our attention the latest research that elementary parents and schools need to heed the crucial issue of school attendance and how the patterns that are set early on can affect a student for years to come.

Sue Ferguson, of the National Coalition of Parents in Education, has served as our guest editor for this issue. We appreciate her introducing us to these contributing authors for the newsletter and for writing the Viewpoint piece promoting the concept of community schools.

Engaging families is challenging, but establishing these authentic *relationships* with parents and families is necessary if we are to reach our goals of higher graduation rates and brighter futures for our children. We hope this issue brings this important topic to your front burner, and that some of the ideas and resources here will help you, no matter what your position, in school, community, or family.

Program Profile

Increasing high school graduation rates and closing the achievement gap are the goals of most high school reform efforts. However, many of these efforts fail to engage families in a timely, meaningful, or productive way. This reality is troubling when decades of national research show the connection between student success and effective school/family/community partnerships. Given the importance of engaging families to close the achievement gap and increase student success, and given that there are unique challenges for staff seeking to engage families once their students are in high school, one program in Sacramento offers an exciting opportunity for all high schools to consider.

This summer in Sacramento, California, teachers and school site staff members from two large comprehensive high schools decided to go the extra mile to engage students

The home visit connections have resulted in more parent involvement and increased communication between families and teachers at the school site.

and families. Staff from Hiram Johnson and Luther Burbank, two large comprehensive high schools in the Sacramento City Unified School District, focused on two at-risk groups of students: incoming 9th graders transitioning from local middle schools and incoming 11th graders who had not passed the California High School Exit Exam as sophomores. The goal of the home visits for both groups focused on building connections and trust with the students and their families, taking the time to share hopes and dreams for success in high school, and offering resources and information to make those dreams a reality. This effort, which began three years ago as a pilot program, continues to grow. In the first summer of the pilot, approximately 25 staff participated from both sites and 340 home visits took place. This past summer, a significantly higher number of voluntary staff members at the two schools completed 900 home visits! Hiram Johnson's Math Instructional Coach, Teresa Cummings, says "each year the participation from faculty and staff has grown. It grows from word-of-mouth. When faculty and staff have such a great experience, they talk to other staff members, who then want to participate."

The results have been impressive, and other sites are already coming on board. The home visit connections have resulted in more parent involvement and increased communication between families and teachers at the school site. During home visits, students are encouraged to utilize resources on campus, and there has been a correspondingly steady increase in students attending the after-school exit exam preparatory class at Hiram Johnson and Luther Burbank High Schools. At Luther Burbank, feedback from

families led to the launch of a Parent University program that provides classes for parents—on topics they chose—to increase their capacity and to assist them to better understand the high school experience and post-high school opportunities.

These high school home visits are the latest development in a 10-year outreach effort led by the Parent Teacher Home Visit Project members, a nonprofit organization jointly governed by three key entities: Sacramento Area Congregations Together (ACT), Sacramento Teachers Association (SCTA), and Sacramento City Unified School District (SCUSD). The project started as a way to engage families at several school sites with a pervasive history of low student achievement, high levels of poverty, and high percentages of children entering schools as English learners. Over the years, the project has grown from eight local elementary and middle school sites. Currently, 41 sites in the SCUSD are funded to conduct home visits, including all of the large comprehensive high schools in the district. Additionally, the project has become a model for statewide and national replication.

Over the years, this project's efforts and impact of home visits has been independently evaluated. The first year of data for the exit exam home visits has also been evaluated. In January of 2009, the Parent Teacher Home Visit Project will launch a multiyear study on the impact of all the home visits that take place at the secondary school level.

Contact: Carrie Rose, Executive Director, carrie_ann_rose_@yahoo.com, or visit www.teachervisits.org.



Yesenia Gonzalez and Jocelyn Graves, Founding Parents of The Parent/Teacher Home Visit Project



National
Dropout Prevention
Center/Network

NEWSLETTER

The *National Dropout Prevention Newsletter* is published quarterly by the National Dropout Prevention Center/Network. Your comments are always welcome. Please address mail to:

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Network Notes

Our Guest Editor

■ Our Guest Editor for this issue is Sue Ferguson. Sue has been in the field of education for over 35 years, specializing in the education of children and youth with disabilities. She has been the Chairperson of the National Coalition for Parent Involvement in Education (NCPIE) since 1994. NCPIE is a coalition of over 90 national education, community, public service, and advocacy organizations. NCPIE's mission is to advocate for the involvement of families in their children's education and to foster relationships between home, school, and community that can enhance the education of all young people. NCPIE meets on a monthly basis to share information among its many organizations, publishes a newsletter highlighting the information gathered from each meeting, and maintains an active Web site and listserv.



November Solutions Webcast

■ Dr. Terry Grier, Superintendent of San Diego Schools, will be our guest on the November program of *Solutions to the Dropout Crisis*. Dr. Grier, a NDPN Board Member, will discuss the Middle College High School concept, which he implemented in multiple schools in Guilford County Schools, NC, before heading west. The program will air live over the Internet on Tuesday, November 25, 2008, at 3:30–4:30 p.m. Eastern Time.



Should you be unable to listen to the program live, it will be available two hours after the program ends. Find it in the Archives on the *Solutions* Web pages, along with all our other previous programs, which include the topics of the Principal's Role in Dropout Prevention, Bullying Prevention, and Educational Technology.

Family Engagement

2009 – A Year of Professional Development

■ The coming year, 2009, will be a banner year in professional development opportunities for members of the National Dropout Prevention Network!

January 12-16, 2009—Effective Strategies Institute on Dropout Prevention and The Florida America's Promise Summit, *Navigating the Seas to Success*, Clearwater, Florida

Starting off the year, Network members are invited to join Floridians in their America's Promise Summit, which is joining forces with the 2009 Effective Strategies Institute in Clearwater.



February 15-18, 2009—America's At-Risk Youth National FORUM, *School and Community: Working Together as a Comprehensive Approach to Dropout Prevention*, Myrtle Beach, South Carolina

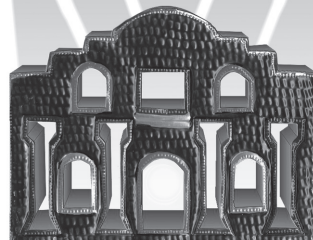
Two pre-FORUM sessions will be offered this year on Sunday, the 15th. Doris Settles and Jennifer Watson of Kentucky Child Now will conduct a workshop on *Web 2.0 and School Culture*; Drs. Renee Stubbs and Cindy Johnson-Taylor of Newberry College will present a workshop on *Making the Most of Instruction*.

April 19-22, 2009—National Forum on Dropout Prevention Strategies for Native Communities, *Reconnecting Native Youth to Education*, Phoenix, Arizona

Sponsored by the National Dropout Prevention Center/Network, the Arizona Department of Education, and the National Indian Education Association, this conference seeks programs and research to share in the areas of (1) school safety; (2) parent/community involvement; (3) leadership; (4) curriculum, instruction, and assessment; (5) school climate; and (6) research. Deadline for proposal submission is February 27, 2009.



Illuminating the path to the future
21st Annual
National Dropout Prevention
Network Conference



October 25-28, 2009—21st Annual Dropout Prevention Network Conference, *Illuminating the Path to the Future*, San Antonio, Texas

The Call for Presenters is now available online, inviting innovative, skilled presenters who have excellent ideas, proven programs, and research to share in the areas of (1) school and cultural knowledge, (2) curriculum and instruction, (3) students with exceptionalities, (4) English language learners, (5) community connections, (6) school-home collaborations, (7) school-work partnerships, (8) assessment, and (9) effective school leadership.

Engaging Families in the Pathway to College: Lessons From Schools That Are Beating the Odds

by Anne T. Henderson

How well is your high school preparing low-income students to graduate on time ready for college-level work—and with a college or technical school acceptance letter in hand? In what ways is your school engaging families in this pathway to college? A new study on high-performing schools in New York City, and a tool based on this research, may help you answer these questions.

Beating the Odds: How Thirteen NYC Schools Bring Low-Performing Ninth-Graders to Timely Graduation and College Enrollment, by Carol Ascher and Cindy Maguire, is a study of 13 New York City high schools.¹ As shown in the chart below, these schools admitted ninth graders with high poverty rates and low reading and math scores, but produced four-year graduation rates 10 points above the district average. Thirty-five percent planned to attend the City University of New York, compared to 28.3% of students in a group of comparison schools.

Comparison of Outcomes: BTO Schools vs. All NYC High Schools (2005 Data)

| Outcomes | BTO Schools | All NYC Schools |
|--|-------------|-----------------|
| Graduation rate after 4 years | 68.2% | 58.2% |
| 9th graders eligible for F/R lunch | 52.3% | 46.8% |
| 9th graders at bottom two reading levels | 78.3% | 64.5% |
| 9th graders average | 31.0% | 28.9% |

What are these schools doing?

To develop a framework for observation and analysis, Ascher and Maguire identified findings in the literature on high school improvement, their observations of actual practice, and interviews with students and educators at the 13 schools. The four key components of their framework are:

- Academic rigor
- A network of timely supports
- A culture of college access
- Effective use of data

For each component, the authors developed a set of indicators that describe good practice. Although practices varied widely among the schools, certain common tendencies stand out. To promote high academic expectations, for example, nearly all the schools developed shared standards for rigor across all courses through ongoing faculty meetings and professional development. Classroom visits by the principal and other instructional leaders monitored teaching quality and course content. All students are expected to take college prep and AP classes, even those in technical and career programs, and their progress is closely tracked.

To make sure students can succeed in this rigorous climate, a network of supports kicks in when they start to struggle or fall behind. Timely, short-term interventions—such as tutoring, extra assistance, and extended day programs—allow students to catch up quickly. In many BTO schools, the teacher role is expanded so that each student has an adult mentor or advisor. Advisory programs include setting detailed college-going and career objectives so that students understand how to reach their goals. Counselors or other staff coordinate academic and technical courses with requirements for college, postsecondary technical education, and future careers.

All the BTO schools made it clear to students and families alike that they offer a college prep program. Counselors, recognizing the importance of family support for the goal of attending college, kept parents and other family informed about required tests and courses, the college admissions process, financial aid applications, and likely prospects among colleges in the area, starting in ninth grade. Many schools have a special “college office” for students (and families) to get information, fill out applications, and receive counseling on attending college. Regular visits to the school by community members, graduates, and college reps show students the possibility and value of going to college.

Finally, the BTO schools try to use data effectively. Counselors and other staff track four- and five-year graduation rates, and percentages of students applying to, and attending, two- and four-year colleges. The rates at which students take the PSAT, SAT and ACT tests are monitored, and some schools require (and pay for) all students to take the PSAT. Financial aid and test score data are compiled and tracked. Most BTO schools also keep track of graduates’ experiences and retention rates in the different colleges they attend.

How are families involved?

The component with the strongest connection to families is the culture of college access. To illustrate how BTO schools have implemented effective practices, the authors developed a rubric that describes for each goal and indicator the extent to which students are affected, from beginning stages to reaching all students. This rubric has been developed into an assessment tool that anyone interested in improving a high school can use. For each indicator, what the practice looks like at each level is described. The five-part tool is available on the Annenberg Institute for School Reform Web site in pdf, and it

includes a blank rubric so that school improvement teams or others can write in evidence from their own setting.²

What specific practices are BTO schools using to engage families?

To expose students and families to college, some schools have built special relationships with a few public and private colleges to which they steer most of their graduates. Tours of these schools are offered each year. BTO alumni on the campuses facilitate connections for students and families with their classmates and teachers. One BTO school holds an annual one-week college tour to traditionally Black colleges in the South, which is funded by local foundations.

Several BTO schools host visits from colleges, or hold a College Fair, to which parents and family members are invited. One school also holds a separate Hispanic College Fair, where counselors lobby for undocumented students, steering them toward nonfederal scholarships. Many of the schools are partners in the city's College Now program that covers both academic and technical courses. College Now is a free program that helps prepare public high school students for college. Similar programs exist in many cities. In most cases, a public high school teams up with one or more of the City University of New York (CUNY) colleges to create a College Now partnership. The program offers academic courses, campus-based tours, cultural events, and scholarships.³

Strategies to involve parents in the goal of attending college generally center on activities for families to provide information about the college application process. Parent coordinators (often family members or alumni), who serve as informal liaisons between the school and parents, facilitate the workshops. Offered in the evening and on weekends, these "parent academies" and "forums" also help families fill out complicated financial aid and college application forms.

As one coordinator said, "We build trust with families to overcome their reluctance to reveal confidential information about family income."

In schools with advisory programs, advisors meet with parents several times a year, in some cases when par-

The greatest impact that families have on student achievement comes through what they do at home to express high expectations for student success.

ents pick up report cards at school. In addition, letters are sent home to notify parents about testing and application schedules. In one school, the parent coordinator makes nightly phone calls to families if their students were absent that day. In another, the parent coordinator held a special workshop for parents about undocumented status and college access.

What does other research say?

Thirty years of research has made it clear that engaging families can have a powerful impact on student achievement and other outcomes.⁴ Although most of this research has been done on elementary school students, several studies strongly suggest that for secondary students, the greatest impact that families have on student achievement comes through what they do at home to express high expectations for student success, discuss plans for education after high school, and help students prepare for college.⁵

In other words, parents and family members must know how to be *advocates* for their children. An advocate is a person who speaks out for another. Building on this research, we can construct a job description for a parent advocate:

- Set high expectations and follow their children's progress—monitoring attendance, homework, grades, and test scores.
- Help their child set goals and plan for the future.
- Steer the student through the system, selecting courses and programs that match the goals.
- Intervene if the student is under pressure, has a problem, or is being treated unfairly.
- Get assistance when needed, such as tutoring, medical attention, or counseling.
- Monitor their child's out-of-school time and make sure it's spent in constructive activities.

The more that school staff keep parents and family members informed about what their students are doing, how well they are doing, what is required for them to graduate on time, and how to plan for the goal of attending college, the more effectively families can play this role, and the better their children will do over the long term. The BTO schools clearly understand this and have put it into action.

Endnotes

1. Carol Ascher and Cindy Maguire, *Beating the Odds: How Thirteen NYC Schools Bring Low-Performing Ninth-Graders to Timely Graduation and College Enrollment* (Providence, RI and New York: Brown University, Annenberg Institute for School Reform, 2007). The study is available online at: www.annenberginstitute.org/CIP/publications/2007/beating-the-odds.pdf.
2. To see or download the tool, *Putting Kids on the Pathway to College: How Is Your School Doing?* A College Pathways Rubric, go to: www.annenberginstitute.org/Products/CollegePathwaysRubric.php. The five parts of the tool are: The framework, the rubric, a list of specific practices for each indicator, a blank rubric, and a short resource directory.
3. For more information on College Now, go to: <http://www.cuny.edu/education/collegenow>.
4. Anne T. Henderson and Karen L. Mapp, *A New Wave of Evidence: The Impact of School, Family and Community Connections on Student Achievement* (Austin TX: Southwest Educational Development Lab, 2002). This review is available at: www.sedl.org/connections
5. Anne T. Henderson, Karen L. Mapp, Vivian R. Johnson, and Don Davies, *Beyond the Bake Sale: The Essential Guide to Family-School Partnerships* (NY: The New Press, 2007). See Chapter 7: Supporting Advocacy (pp. 151-186). For more information, go to: www.thenewpress.com/bakesale

—Anne T. Henderson
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Book Review

Beyond the Bake Sale: The Essential Guide to Family-School Partnerships, 2007. Anne T. Henderson, Karen L. Mapp, Vivian R. Johnson, & Don Davies. The New Press, New York. [ISBN 978-1-56584-888-7]

Do you have trouble engaging parents and families in your school? Do parents fail to come to conferences, open houses, or other activities sponsored by the school? Do you want your students' parents to be more supportive of your efforts, but you can't seem to make successful connections with them?

If you answered yes to any of these questions, then *Beyond the Bake Sale* is just the book for you! Even if you already have achieved some success in engaging parents and families, this book will provide you with a variety of effective practices that are tried and true, that involve parents and families in a multitude of ways.

Family engagement is a significant indicator of a child's success in school and is one of the National Dropout Prevention Center's Fifteen Effective Strategies. Schools can pave the way towards positive family engagement by becoming what the authors call a "partnership school" where family, school, and community work together to ensure that every student succeeds.

At the beginning of the book, you can assess your school to see if it has the components of a partnership school, or are there elements of an "open-door school," which has some good efforts going; a "come-if-we-call school," which welcomes parents for limited involvement; and a "fortress school," where it is felt the parents belong at home and that the school is an oasis for a trouble community.

Beyond the Bake Sale introduces many new ways to involve parents as true partners in their child's education. Expand your perceptions of family engagement by obtaining a copy of this book. Following their many examples, using their tools and resources, your school could be transformed!

—Marty Duckenfield

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Also Recommended:

101 Ways to Create Real Family Engagement, (2008), by Steven M. Constantino. Readers will learn how to build on a new cultural foundation and create the relationships that motivate family involvement, and ultimately create family engagement. The book contains more than 100 tested ways to create REAL family engagement.

Resources

The Family Involvement Network of Educators (FINE)

The Family Involvement Network of Educators (FINE) brings together thousands of stakeholders committed to promoting strong partnerships between schools, families, and communities. The majority of FINE members are K-12 school staff, workers from youth-serving institutions outside of schools, researchers, and higher education faculty. Parents, school and district consultants, students, and policy advocates are also members of FINE.
www.finenetwork.org

National Coalition for Parent Involvement in Education (NCPIE)

National Coalition for Parent Involvement in Education (NCPIE) has as its mission: to advocate the involvement of parents and families in their children's education, and to foster relationships between home, school, and community to enhance the education of all our nation's young people.
www.ncpie.org

Intercultural Development Research Association (IDRA)

Intercultural Development Research Association (IDRA) conducts research, development, and training activities. IDRA has a packet of bilingual materials to help Latino families plan for college. IDRA's Project PASS (Parent Action for School Success) promotes effective parent engagement.
www.idra.org

Parent Information and Resource Centers (PIRC)

With funding from the U.S. Department of Education, more than 80 PIRCs are working to inform and educate parents, family advocates, educators, community organizers, faith-based activists and others committed to educational success for all students, especially low-income, minority, and English language learning students.
www.pirc-info.net

Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory (NWREL)

A range of free online resources related to parent and family involvement are available from NWREL.
www.nwrel.org

Events

Jan. 12-16, 2009 Clearwater, FL
Effective Strategies Institute on Dropout Prevention and The Florida America's Promise Summit,
Navigating the Seas to Success,
Clearwater, Florida
www.dropoutprevention.org

Jan. 27-28, 2009 Madison, WI
2009 Careers Conference—*From Inspiration to Application*
www.cew.wisc.edu

Feb. 15-18, 2009 Myrtle Beach, SC
21st Annual At-Risk Youth National FORUM—*School and Community: Working Together as a Comprehensive Approach to Dropout Prevention*
www.dropoutprevention.org

March 18-21, 2009 Nashville, TN
20th Annual National Service-Learning Conference—*Growing Hope, Cultivating Change*
www.nylc.org

Children Must Be Present to Learn

by Hedy Chang

At the core of school improvement and education reform is an assumption so widely understood that it is rarely invoked: Students have to be present and engaged in order to learn. That is why the discovery that thousands of our youngest students are academically at risk because of extended absences when they first embark upon their school careers is as remarkable as it is consequential. Co-authored by Hedy N. Chang and Maria José Romero, Ph.D., the report, *Present, Engaged, and Accounted For*, examines the critical but overlooked issue of chronic early absence (missing 10% or more of school over the course of a year).

Nationwide, one out of ten kindergarteners and first graders are chronically absent, although levels can be much more in particular school districts. Few districts, however, regularly assess whether early absence is a problem. Elementary schools typically track average daily attendance or unexcused absences (truancy), but few monitor the combination of excused and unexcused absence for *individual* students. High average daily attendance can mask the presence of large numbers of chronically absent students.

Consistent attendance, starting with the first years of school, is key to academic success. Chronic absence in kindergarten is associated with lower academic performance in first grade for all children. Among poor children, chronic kindergarten absence predicts the lowest levels of fifth grade achievement. The education of regularly attending students can also be adversely affected when teachers divert their attention to meet the

learning and social needs of chronically absent peers.

When chronic early absence occurs, schools can partner with families and communities to examine and address the factors that might play a contributing role.

Is chronic early absence an indication that *schools* . . .

- do not communicate the importance of attendance to parents in linguistically and culturally appropriate ways?
- do not monitor absences or reach out to families when children miss extended periods of time to identify and address barriers to school attendance?
- do not effectively engage parents in their children's education?
- do not offer a high quality, engaging, and safe educational experience because they are underresourced and suffer from challenges such as limited learning supports, high teacher turnover and absenteeism, and inadequate school facilities?

Is chronic early absence an indication that *families* . . .

- are unaware of the adverse impact of chronic early absence and have not yet developed routines that promote consistent school attendance?
- are poor and lack the resources (transportation, food, clothing, social supports, etc.) to ensure their children regularly attend school?
- are highly mobile?
- have difficulty addressing and managing illness, especially chronic disease?
- have a history of negative experiences with education and may not feel welcome in schools?
- face multiple risks (for example, living in poverty, teen motherhood, single motherhood, low maternal education, unemployment, food insecurity, poor maternal health, and multiple siblings)?
- are dealing with serious problems (for instance, mental illness, homelessness, child or domestic abuse,

incarceration of a parent, etc.) that make school attendance difficult because family life has been disrupted and public agencies and schools lack a coordinated response?

Is chronic early absence an indication that *communities* . . .

- do not provide adequate support (such as high quality preschool programs) to help young children and families make a positive transition into elementary school?
- are severely distressed and suffer from a dearth of formal or informal supports to promote the positive development of children, including regular school attendance?
- experience high levels of violence that adversely affect family functioning and getting children to school safely?

Schools and communities have a choice: They can work together early on to ensure families get their children to class consistently or they can pay later. A comprehensive and intentional approach characterizes the school district in the study that had the lowest level of chronic early absence (5.4%). Each school has an attendance team, which makes sure that families are contacted as soon as students miss three days of school. Home visits occur after five days. This district actively collaborates with public agencies as well as community-based agencies and is located in a state providing universal preschool education. Over the past four years, chronic early absence fell from 10% to 5% among young students living in high poverty neighborhoods.

A truly comprehensive approach such as this is needed to address chronic absence when it first occurs as children enter school.

The full report is available from the National Center for Children in Poverty at www.nccp.org.

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Viewpoint

Alarms are finally sounding about the incredible dropout rate in this country and states, districts, and individual schools are scrambling for solutions. I don't want to see this turn into a finger-pointing exercise with everyone looking for someone to blame. It would be such a waste of time. The problem belongs to all of us, and it will take all of us to solve it.

There is excellent new research (included in this newsletter) that discusses the impact of chronic early absenteeism on later dropout behavior. Research also reflects the critical impact of the achievement gap among ethnic groups, English language learners, and students with disabilities making it difficult for students to get up to grade level with each passing year. And poverty coupled with high levels of mobility make it increasingly difficult for kids to keep up with their classmates as well as equally difficult for schools to educate them. Our economy today will certainly add to the problems that already exist of poverty, homelessness, and mobility.

Often, our schools, families, and communities work in isolation from one another making communication

difficult and problem solving impossible. So what are some possible solutions? How do we break through this isolation?

We need to bring back community schools. We need to make schools the center of the community again where coordinated services support our children, youth, and their families. There needs to be multiple outreach strategies to keep families informed and involved in programs and events, and these strategies are often best implemented by a trained parent/family coordinator. This coordinator, sensitive to the needs of diverse family backgrounds, is able to contact parents directly to develop a trusting relationship essential to establishing good communications between home and school. When schools, families, and communities work together to support learning, children tend to do better in school, stay in school longer, and like school more.

Professional development, both pre-service and in-service, is critical to preparing educators to work effectively with families. Educators need to learn how to work with families of diverse cultural backgrounds and how to collaborate with them to improve

student achievement. Families also need to learn how the school system works and how they can be effective advocates for their child. As an example, the Parent Institute for Quality Education (www.piqe.org) has a very successful nine-week program that provides parents with information, knowledge, skills, and a personal commitment to improve the conditions surrounding the educational and personal development of their children.

The key to the success of any community school is a willingness to work together to improve education. From early childhood through high school, families play a significant role in student learning. When families are positively engaged, schools become places where all children do well.

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The purpose of Viewpoint is to allow professionals to express their opinions about issues related to dropout prevention. The opinions expressed by these authors do not necessarily reflect those of the National Dropout Prevention Center/Network.

 National Dropout Prevention Center/Network



NEWSLETTER

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