

**Brent Campbell Presentation Resource #1**

**Henderson, A. T. (2007). Beyond the bake sale: The essential guide to family-school partnerships. New Press: Distributed by W.W. Norton.**

## Chapter 4

# Developing Relationships

### *How Can You Build Trust Instead of Blaming Each Other?*

Parents tell us that feeling welcome and being treated with respect by school staff is the number one key to their connection with a school. When school staff construct caring and trustful relationships with parents, treating parents as partners in their children's education, parents are far more likely to become involved—and stay involved.

From talking with principals, teachers, and other school staff, we've learned that many would like advice and tools about *how* to build trust and cultivate warm relationships with families. In this chapter, we explore steps that school leaders and your action team can take to create a school culture that fosters positive relationships with families and community members.

## Trust Makes the Difference

When people feel liked, valued, and respected, they collaborate more readily. In their study of trust in Chicago public schools, Tony Bryk and Barbara Schneider found that schools where staff trust parents and their colleagues tend to have higher levels of student achievement. For example, teachers at schools with test results in the top quarter tend to have “strong” and “very strong” levels of trust, while teachers at schools in the bottom quarter tend to have “none” or “minimal” levels of trust.<sup>1</sup>

Bryk and Schneider’s definition of trust is based on four qualities that people see in one another: respect, integrity, competence, and personal regard. They used these to develop a framework to look at the trust level in schools.<sup>2</sup> The chart on the following page uses their framework to show how school staff might describe relationships in a school where people trust each other.

## The Joining Process

In her research on how and why parents are involved in their children’s education, Karen Mapp asked parents to identify what school staff actually did to create trusting and respectful relationships. What parents told her led to Mapp’s development of the “joining process.” (The material about the joining process in this chapter is drawn from Mapp’s 2003 article in the *School Community Journal*, “Having Their Say: Parents Describe Why and How They Are Engaged in Their Children’s Education.” This research was conducted at the O’Hearn School in Boston.)<sup>3</sup> Designing and implementing a joining process is a crucial job for your action team.

### RESEARCH BRIEF:

## Schools’ practices of involvement are key

Epstein and Dauber note, “The strongest and most consistent predictors of parent involvement at school and at home are the specific school programs and teachers’ practices that encourage and guide parent involvement. Regardless of parent education, family size, student ability, or school level . . . parents are more likely to become partners in their children’s education if they perceive that the schools have strong practices to involve parents at school.”<sup>4</sup>

**Element of trust****How school staff may describe a high-trust school****RESPECT:**

mutual esteem that recognizes the important role each person plays in a child's education

- People listen genuinely to one another.
- Parents can talk with teachers and feel they have a say in what happens to their children.
- Teachers can voice their concerns and feel that administrators will heed what they say.
- Principals feel that teachers care about school and will seriously consider their proposals.

**COMPETENCE:**

a feeling that colleagues work together to create an effective working environment and get the job done

- Our colleagues work hard, control their classrooms, and provide challenging teaching.
- Administrators provide an orderly, safe building.
- Parents provide for their children's basic needs and support education at home.

**INTEGRITY:** a feeling that colleagues keep their word and do what they say they're going to do

- People's words and actions are consistent.
- Our school places the highest priority on children's best interests, and this is the highest purpose of the school.

**PERSONAL REGARD:**

a feeling that colleagues care about one another and are willing to go out of their way to help

- Teachers stay after hours to meet with parents.
- Teachers go the extra mile to help each other and advise a new teacher.
- Teachers are willing to give students extra help.
- School staff get involved in local community matters.

In the three-part joining process, the school community:

1. Welcomes parents into the school
2. Honors their participation
3. Connects with parents through a focus on the children and their learning

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Welcoming, honoring, and connecting with families creates a school community in which everyone says they feel like “members of a family.” Parents respond to this culture by becoming loyal members of the school community, and by taking part in their children’s education in ways they had never envisioned.

## **Welcome All Families to Your School Community**

Parents report that a welcoming process creates a sense of belonging. Not only do parents feel that they belong to the school, but they also feel that the school belongs to them. This sense of belonging motivates parents to be more active in their children’s schooling. How do school staff and leaders create a welcoming environment? Here are some good practices:

### *The Welcome Mat Is Out*

Even before families enter the school, they look for reassurance that they will be welcomed when they step through the door. Here are some signals:

- ◆ Friendly signs (in all major languages spoken by your families) point out the entrance and say that families and visitors are welcome.
- ◆ Parking spots for parents and visitors are clearly marked and are near (or at least not very far from) the entrance.
- ◆ School staff and parents greet visitors in a friendly way and ask if they can help.
- ◆ Teachers, administrators, and other school staff go outside the building to greet and talk with parents.

### *The Whole Family Enrolls in the School*

It’s not just the student who joins a school community, it’s the whole family. An enrollment process for new families might include tours of the school in the spring or before school starts in the fall, as well as welcome phone calls and special events to introduce new families to other parents and to school staff

At the beginning of the school year, hold a "Welcome Night" for parents to meet the staff and follow their student's schedule. Assign "buddies" for new students and their families. Why not do the same for new staff—including custodians, secretaries, and cafeteria workers? Greeting them with a welcoming celebration will set the tone for the whole school community.

### *The School Feels Warm and Friendly*

When first coming into your building, what do families and visitors see? What happens when they enter the front office or sign in at the security desk? What's on the walls to tell them about students and the great work they are doing? Parents tell us they love coming to school when they see things like this:

- ◆ The entryway is obvious (not behind the Dumpster in the back parking lot). It's clean, attractive, and well-lit. It's wheelchair-accessible. A sign welcomes visitors.
- ◆ Colorful signs (in different languages, as needed) direct you where to go.
- ◆ Brightly colored walls are decorated with student artwork or colorful murals the students have painted.
- ◆ Displays of student projects and other celebrations of student accomplishments outnumber warning posters about alcohol, drug abuse, teen pregnancy, and dropping out.

"When your child first starts at this school, other parents call you up and welcome you. That's really nice. Then they have a new-parent breakfast, which they have every year. I managed to drag myself there with my screaming child. He was really good there, and I met many of the parents that I see all the time now, and everybody was very friendly. That started the interest for me, to see how involved everyone was. I felt like it was a 'welcoming-into-the-school' kind of thing, and that made me feel like, 'Look at all these people, doing all this for the parents.' So I try to do whatever I can whenever they have parties, make food, or something. I do something to help out."

*(Parent, Boston)*

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## STORY:

### “The Counter”

Steve Constantino, a former principal, tells this story about his first day as a high school principal in Virginia:

Walking into the front office, the new principal noticed the worn carpet, mismatched plastic chairs, and the clocks that told the wrong time. Then there was *the counter*. There it stood, fifteen feet long and four feet high, covered with peeling laminate, a man-made barrier between the school and those who dared to enter. Behind the counter were the tops of two heads. After a few minutes, he coughed. No luck.

Finally, he said, “Good morning.” The secretary closest to him looked up and said, “Yes?” (He later learned that it was her job to greet people.)

“I’m the new principal.”

“Oh, your office is over there.” She pointed and went back to work.

The message? *Welcome to our broken-down school where we hope we will make you feel as though you are imposing on us. Please take a seat in the mismatched uncomfortable plastic chairs while we decide if we are going to help you or not.*

That afternoon, the counter was taken down, forever.<sup>5</sup>



### *People Are Accessible*

Being ignored or treated rudely is dispiriting. To have a family-friendly culture requires some standards of welcoming behavior, not to mention an open-door policy. This is how parents describe schools they see as inviting:

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- ◆ All the staff greet students, families, visitors, and each other in a genuinely friendly way.
- ◆ The front office staff look up as soon as you come in and greet you warmly. If you don't speak English well, they quickly find someone who can interpret.
- ◆ The principal is open and available. Not only are there regular

## **BRIGHT IDEA**

### **“Getting to Know You**

In Corpus Christi middle schools, teachers made posters about themselves and put them on the wall outside their classroom. The posters showed where they were born and went to school, described their interests and hobbies, and listed their favorite books. Students love pointing out photos of their teachers as children and pictures of their current family and pets. Students’ families like learning about teachers as real people. Middle and high school students, who often see seven or eight teachers a day, especially appreciate this personal touch.

office hours to meet with families, but the principal also walks the halls and schoolyard, attends school events without a body-guard, and visits community hangouts.

- ✦ At the beginning and end of the school day, teachers are outside greeting students and their families as they come and go.
- ✦ The PTA or parent group offers lots of opportunities to network and meet different people.
- ✦ The school publishes a directory or has a bulletin board that includes pictures of all the staff (including classified and support staff).

### ***Smaller Is Better***

Sometimes, school-wide events such as open houses can feel like cattle drives. Families are herded into the building, go through their paces, and leave without ever talking to someone long enough to make a real connection. Consider breaking down big events into smaller ones that are more inviting and less intimidating.

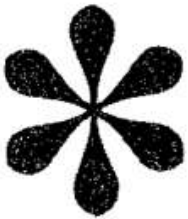
- ✦ Class meetings, grade-level socials, book groups, clubs, and other activities offer opportunities for small group conversations

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- For ESL families, offer interpreters or special activities in their home language.
- ◆ Back-to-school nights can be spread out over a week, with one grade per night.
  - ◆ One-to-one interactions, such as informal conversations on the school grounds and home visits by parents or staff, can build deep personal connections.
  - ◆ A family center provides a place where small groups of parents can gather spontaneously or meet with school staff. (Make sure it's in a handicapped-accessible area of the school.) The center can be the home base of the family-school coordinator.
  - ◆ The school library is open at night for families to use and take classes.



### **Tip from a Principal:**

#### **Restructure back-to-school nights so they're less rushed and more intimate**

Hold back-to-school nights or open houses one grade level per night, on six different nights—or at least have one night for primary grades, the next for elementary. This way, parents with several children can meet all their children's teachers. Design them so that parents go to the classrooms, spend time with teachers, and learn about the expectations for learning. In middle school, organize teachers into teams, then have them meet with the families in their team.

*(Karl Smith, Ramsey Elementary School,  
Alexandria, Virginia)*

If schools don't make this kind of effort to engage families, all too often the families will stay away. School staff may not consider the possibility that the school environment and culture are unfriendly to families. Building partnerships requires developing purposeful and systematic initiatives that welcome families into the school community. One way to start is to do a Welcoming School Walk-Through. For more information about this process, see Chapter 10.

## **A Formula for High Turnouts.**

A fourth grade teacher at a low-income elementary school in Johnston County, North Carolina, routinely draws about 90 percent of her families to school activities. She sends handwritten notes home, inviting families to teach a lesson, join their children for a barbecue chicken lunch, or plant a class garden. She is on a first-name basis with all her students' parents and makes sure each one has her cell phone number.

Cathy David, who served as a principal at a diverse urban school in Virginia, says, "Make sure that the parents know that you care about their child. More than anything else, this builds trust." David suggests several ways to win the trust of families:

- Invite families to come into the school to drop off and pick up their children at the classroom door. This brings them into the building, so you can greet and get to know them.
- Keep confidential information to yourself—don't share it with your colleagues in the faculty lounge.
- Make *no* assumptions about families—get to know them and their kids.
- Give tours for new families.
- Be at a parent-teacher conference if there is a problem.

## **Honor Families by Recognizing Their Strengths and Contributions**

In this second part of the joining process, the school community honors families by respecting and recognizing their strengths—and validating and affirming their efforts to be involved in their children's learning. As we discuss in the next chapter, you have to meet parents where they are, not where you think they ought to be.

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Parents say they feel honored when school staff treat them as true partners in their children's educational development and invite them to work on decision-making committees and projects. Pairing newcomers with veteran parent volunteers builds their self-confidence further. This encouragement and support often motivate parents to become involved in new ways.



### Tip from a Principal:

#### Don't be afraid to ask parents for help or advice

If you're discussing a tough issue, ask them: "What do you think we should do?"

(Claire Crane, principal,  
Ford Elementary School, Lynn, Massachusetts)

### Adopt a Partnership Philosophy

This means *sharing power*, and setting up mechanisms such as councils, committees, and focus groups. Giving families a voice in decisions and real jobs to do are convincing signals that the school recognizes and values parents. Parent input should be welcome in all aspects of the school, from personnel selection and evaluation to the curriculum and academic programs, and from discipline policy to extracurricular activities. For more information about this, see Chapter 8, "Sharing Power."

- ◆ Give parents a real voice in governance, not just a rubber-stamp role. Be sure they have equal representation on all matters put to a vote.
- ◆ Send out a School Climate Survey (see Chapter 11) every year, and give the results to parents. Post them on your school Web site. Ask the parent association to manage this process.
- ◆ At school council meetings and school discussion groups, take on tough issues, not just the safe stuff. Tackle questions such as tracking (who gets into the gifted program or AP math?), racism and prejudice, and teacher treatment of students. Start by circulating a newspaper article or e-mail on the topic. Ask a neutral

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- ◆ Give families a voice in selecting and evaluating the principal and staff. Ask what qualities are important to them. Put parents on the interview team and selection committee.
- ◆ Make sure a diverse group of families is involved in committees and leadership positions, not just the in-crowd or the “principal’s pets.”

What about the “rabble-rousers” and “troublemakers”—the parents who always seem to have a negative point of view or complain that they’re never consulted? It is wiser to include them than to isolate or ignore them. Find out their interests and skills, and build on what they’re good at. Team them up with people who have a positive attitude. Find out what’s really bothering them and respond to that. Often, just feeling respected and included will take care of the problem.

“My school asks for parents’ participation and advice all the time. It seems like the school lets the parents make the decisions, and that makes the parents become more involved. We feel like we’re really a part of it. At the meetings, it’s just like a family. Issues [are] being discussed, parents talk about what we feel is best for our child or for the school as a whole. Then we vote on it. If you have any suggestions, they’re always open to that.”

*(Parent, Boston)*

## ***Embrace Your Families***

Every single family can make some contribution to the school. Recognize all forms of family engagement (not just fund-raising) and offer different outlets for involvement, at home and in the community. Celebrations and awards ceremonies are a good way to honor their contributions. Send thank-you notes or little certificates of appreciation. Here are some ideas that school-family coordinators have given us:

- ◆ Invite and include all families and all family members.
- ◆ Hold activities at times that are convenient for families, such as six to eight in the evening, or at varying times to fit families’ different work schedules.
- ◆ Make events fun and involve the whole family. Invite a local jazz combo to play at the open house. Ask parents to be greet-

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ers, welcoming families as they enter and introducing them to others.

- ◆ Provide food and child care.
- ◆ Recognize the whole family—dads, grandparents, older siblings, aunts and uncles.
- ◆ Make it easy for families who speak little English to take part. Offer translation and interpreters; make sure they're welcomed and feel included.



### **Tip from a Principal: Don't hesitate to apologize**

"If you have the trust of your community, you can weather a storm and have time to get your side of the story out," says former principal Cathy David. "Show you care, follow through and do what you say you will, and own up to your mistakes.

"A parent wrote a check for a student activity, and it didn't get deposited for two weeks. The check bounced. The parent was furious, because there was money in her account when she wrote it, but not two weeks later. Instead of accusing the parent of not keeping track of her account, I apologized for the delay. That was the end of the problem."

Parents have told us that they felt respected and validated when their ideas and concerns are heard and taken seriously. Even if teachers and parents disagree over an issue, it is not a problem when both sides are willing to listen and take each other's feedback seriously. When the teacher view prevails, parents feel that the relationship is still one of equals, because the parents' contributions to the discussion were given equal weight and importance.

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### *Listen and Respond to Families*

Ask families about themselves and their children. Find out what their interests are and what they would like to learn more about. Ask them about

# HONORING FAMILIES

## Do more

- "Hello! Welcome to our school. How may I help you?"
- Welcome signs with name of the school and principal.
- Parent meetings that break into small discussion groups, each picking a leader.
- One-to-one and small group meetings.
- Thanking parents for contributions large or small.
- Meeting and greeting parents before and after school, and going to community events.
- Rotating meetings before school, evenings, and weekends.
- Involving families in selecting a new reading program.
- Surveying families to get their ideas and opinions about activities and programs.

## Do less

- "Who are you? What do you want?"
- NO TRESPASSING signs.
- Parent meetings dominated by a few "officers."
- Large meetings in the school gym.
- Complaining that parents don't do more.
- Hiding in the office and assigning parent involvement to the assistant principal or teacher's aide.
- Meeting only during school hours.
- Announcing a new reading program.
- Planning events, then publicizing them to parents.

the most convenient times of day, and days of the week, for meetings and activities. Find out the best ways and places to get information to them—for example, by cell phone, land line, Web site, or e-mail. Post notices at the grocery store, church, nail shop, or community center. Act on their suggestions, and, if you can't do it right away (or ever), explain why.

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Questions such as these are included in the School Climate Survey, Needs Assessment Survey, Parent Review, and Parent Volunteer Survey tools in Chapter 11. Learning from families about their concerns, skills, strengths, and ideas is essential to planning effective programs.

## **A TEACHER'S STORY:**

### **“We Need to Learn How to Listen!”**

Melissa Whipple, coordinator of the parent academic liaison program in San Diego, tells this story:

I was at a staff development training where teachers were discussing an issue in small groups. One teacher was very good at listening. After a colleague offered an opinion, she repeated what she understood that person had said. Then she checked to make sure the group understood the speaker's point of view.

This really let us work efficiently and avoid misunderstandings, because she could listen and rephrase the ideas of others so well. After the meeting, I complimented her on this skill and asked her if she had received it through teacher training.

“Oh no,” she said. “I used to be a bank teller. I received what they call ‘active listening’ training because most people are so sensitive about their money. We were thoroughly prepared on how to discuss money-related issues with customers.”

This really struck me: if people are that sensitive about issues related to money, they must be super-sensitive about issues related to their children. Even when people share a common language and culture, we still have miscommunications. Think what happens when differences in upbringing, language, social class, religion, and personal experience change the relationship dynamic!

Teachers deserve training to increase their confidence and capacity to have sensitive conversations with parents. Parents deserve to be treated with insight, skill, and finesse when discussing their child's education and development. If bank tellers get this training, teacher prep and staff development programs should offer it, too.



## BRIGHT IDEA

### Ask for suggestions

Engelhard Elementary School in Louisville has a suggestion box, with forms and pencils next to it, prominently placed in the front entryway. Parents are invited to write down their ideas and are promised a response within twenty-four hours. Even if the suggestion will take more than a day to consider, the parents receive a call of thanks and a promise to get back to them soon.

### *Map Your School's Parent-Teacher Contacts*

A. Teachers, counselors, or advisors are expected to communicate with families:

- 1. When there is a problem
  - 2. At parent-teacher conferences
  - 3. At least once a month if the student is struggling
  - 4. At least once a month with every family
- Other \_\_\_\_\_

B. School-family communications tend to focus on:

- 1. Student problems and misbehavior
  - 2. General news about the class
  - 3. Progress in specific problem areas
  - 4. Overall student progress
- Other \_\_\_\_\_

C. When do parents and teachers have face-to-face contact (besides parent-teacher conferences)?

- 1. Some teachers attend PTA meetings and other events for families.

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- 2. All teachers attend at least one family-oriented activity each semester
  - 3. Teachers greet families before and after school
  - 4. Teachers routinely meet one-on-one or in small groups with families
- Other \_\_\_\_\_

D. How often do teachers send home materials that will help parents work with their children, such as learning kits or interactive homework assignments?

- 1. Rarely
  - 2. Maybe once a month
  - 3. It varies by teacher
  - 4. Every week
- Other \_\_\_\_\_

E. How is student work shared with parents?

- 1. Our school displays the work of top students only
  - 2. Parents can come to school and see work on the bulletin boards
  - 3. Teachers send home student work about once a month
  - 4. Student work goes home every week; parents and teachers comment on progress
- Other \_\_\_\_\_

Add up your score. Give yourself a point of extra credit for each "other" response that moves your school toward open communications with families. The higher the number, the more your communications with families are open and trusting. If your score is 10 or below, develop a plan to open up communications with families.

## Set Ground Rules for Involvement

Obviously, a school can't be wide open all the time. Involve families in designing the terms of engagement. For example, the school can honor families by having an open-door policy, and this policy should set the terms for the visits. Some rules that parents and teachers at the O'Hearn School in Boston have suggested for classroom visit days are listed in the table below.<sup>6</sup>

Do	Don't
1. Walk right into any classroom that does not already have three visitors.	1. Go into any room that already has three other visitors.
2. Go into the room along the side or back.	2. Disrupt the students' learning.
3. Observe what is happening in the room.	3. Take pictures without prior permission.
4. Talk with staff members only if approached by them.	4. Ask staff questions while they're engaged in teaching.
5. Leave when you want. Spend no more than twenty minutes in one room unless otherwise arranged.	
6. Leave messages or questions for staff in their mailboxes.	
7. Ask the principal any question you want.	

## **BRIGHT IDEA**

### **VIP security ID cards**

Security is always a concern, to parents as well as school staff. Because not all parents have a driver's license or other form of official picture ID, a middle school in St. Louis came up with the idea of a special security badge. They called it a "Very Important Parent (VIP) card." To get one, parents came to the office, got their photo taken with an instant camera, and filled out their name on cardstock labeled "VIP" in large, bright letters. Then the card was laminated. Parents wore them proudly.

### *Make Parent-Teacher Conferences Family-Friendly*

These encounters between parents and teachers can provoke anxiety on both sides.

- ◆ Pull together a group of families and teachers to talk about how to make conferences less intimidating.
- ◆ Build a resource file of tips on good parent-teacher conferences.
- ◆ Consider organizing student-led conferences (see the next chapter, "Linking to Learning," for more details), and emphasize information sharing, rather than passing judgment.
- ◆ Prepare for the conference by using the Conference Checklist in Chapter 11.
- ◆ Above all, don't rely on conferences as your school's main contact with families. It's not possible to build constructive working relationships in one or two meetings a year.

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### *Accentuate the Positive*

Sorting and selecting students is one function of a school. Unfortunately, this often results in tagging students (and their families) with negative labels. For example, children in special education classes are often referred

to as “the ADD kids” or “the LD kids.” Don’t think that students, and any parents within earshot, don’t hear these labels!

Associate people with a talent or strength, and try to give everyone a positive identifier. Instead of “special ed student,” say “the boy who built that amazing model” or “the girl who draws the beautiful pictures.” Instead of “single mom” or “trailer park family,” say “wonderful cook” or “math whiz” or “the mom who’s such a help in the office” or “great storyteller.” If a family has fixed up a house, planted a garden, helped out a neighbor, coached a team, or repaired a broken window, get that story out.

## **Connect with Families Through a Focus on the Children and Their Learning**

Putting children at the center allows school staff to connect with families on ways to improve teaching and learning. When every family involvement activity, from school plays to open houses, has a focus on educational achievement, parents get the message: this school has high expectations for students. This show of caring not only for children’s education but for their overall welfare allows parents and school staff to share a deep common interest. (For more detailed information on linking to learning, see the next chapter.)

### ***Enhance Families’ Confidence***

All families want to help their children, but they may not know how. Offer workshops and classes for families about what their children are learning, how to help them at home, how to have productive meetings with teachers, and ways to establish discipline. These topics are popular with families. Several national organizations have developed such programs. See the resources on parent training in Chapter 10 for more information.

“They made me feel like they were there to teach my son. They were always giving me little insights that they saw about him. I knew they were paying attention, that made me feel good. . . . They were telling me things about him that I would have told them, which was so cool. Before the words were coming out of my mouth, they were telling me about his strengths and weaknesses and what should and shouldn’t be done. I said to myself, ‘They know my son.’”

*(Parent, Boston)*

In an online discussion group sponsored by MiddleWeb, teachers recommended looking at student work with parents. (For more information on this interactive Web-based resource, see Chapter 10.) In small groups, parents look at student work, describe what they see and don't see, and discuss what they wonder about. (To protect privacy, no student or teacher names are left on the work.) As Debbie Bambino, one of the teachers, put it: "Parents can add new layers of understanding that will inform our plans to improve our instruction and assignments."

A planning team of parents and teachers at Conway Middle School in Louisville, Kentucky, came up with this Looking at Student Work (LASW) strategy:

1. Every student in the school (grades six to eight) worked through an item from the previous year's state science test.
2. On a staff development day, parents were invited to join teachers in the cafeteria for a LASW session, examining the student work on the item. All items were anonymous.
3. All the teachers participated, not just science teachers, so there were parent and teacher "nonexperts" at each table.
4. They used a rubric (a scoring guide to assess student work) and an LASW protocol that went like this: Small groups looked at a piece of work, using the rubric to evaluate it. Each person rated the work on a sticky note and posted their ratings anonymously. The group discussed the reasons for the ratings, then agreed on one rating.
5. After rating several pieces, the groups revisited their ratings, discussing the level and quality of work and what they learned from the exercise. About thirty parents participated.

John Norton, an education writer and editor at MiddleWeb, observed the process. "This was one of the faculty's first experiences with looking at student work, too, and there were lots of 'ahas' among the parents and the teachers. Parents said they came away with a much clearer idea of what it means to view student work from a standards/mastery point of view."

## ***Home Visits***

A lot of home-school communication is limited to one-way notices and newsletters. Home visits can gain parents' trust, build rapport between families and school, and provide information about how the school works. If parents are reluctant to come to school, a home visit can be a critical link, and often leads to more participation at home and at school.

Who makes home visits? Sometimes teachers, aides, counselors, and principals visit families. Another approach is to recruit and train family advocates or parent-support workers to make home visits. Adults from

### **Steps for Making a Home Visit**

In elementary school, a home visit can proceed in this way:

1. Arrange a visit at a time convenient for the family, usually evenings or weekends.
2. Begin by asking parents to talk about their children's skills, talents, and interests.
3. Relate these abilities to skills students are learning at school. Discuss how chores and other family activities can be ways to build those skills.
4. Introduce short, simple learning activities. For example: using cooking recipes to teach reading, sequencing, and measuring; playing counting and spelling games; doing outdoor science projects.
5. Show how to work with the children, and then observe as parents practice with their children. Leave learning materials behind for families to use.

In middle school, children can serve as hosts for home visits. They meet with teachers before the visit and discuss what kinds of assistance they would like. The home visit can include information about tutoring; special programs in math, science, or other subjects at local museums or colleges; and family activities to improve skills. In any home visit, the focus should always be on helping children to succeed in school.

the community who'd like to work part time are good candidates. They can build relationships with families, explain how the school works, take learning materials such as spelling lists and math learning kits, and show how to use them with children. Title I funds can be used for this purpose.

## Home Visits to Improve Reading Skills

Even though it's in a low-income area, the O'Hearn school has posted some of the highest reading scores in the city, up from near the bottom. How was this transformation achieved?

First, teachers *and* parents had extensive discussions about how to improve. They tested strategies until they figured out what worked. To their surprise, they found that awarding prizes to students for reading the most books did *not* increase reading for most students. Instead, they found that home visits were far more effective. Parents trained as home visitors went to the homes of every new student and took books for each child in the family. Now, 95 percent of students and their families regularly take part in a home reading program. During their discussions, teachers and parents realized that the parent visitors had become an important resource to promote learning:

- ◆ Families received visitors warmly because they called as friends who share their experience of raising children on a small income.
- ◆ As these relationships continued, parents felt encouraged to visit classrooms and participate in school activities.
- ◆ Parents speaking a second language read to their children in their native language and borrowed easy-to-read books in English from the school library.
- ◆ As a result, home reading increased, trusting adult relationships developed, and children's academic performance steadily increased.

## Show Parents That Staff Care About Their Children

In their description of the "Holiday School," a Chicago elementary-middle (K-8) school with a high trust level, Bryk and Schneider describe how the teachers have high expectations for the students, even though they live in an impoverished area. That teachers and parents share the same goals did not happen by chance.

"Holiday teachers knew that they had to make a concerned effort to help parents understand what they needed to do for their children to progress in school. [They say] 'I talk to my parents. I let them know what I really expect from them and their kids . . . and what I'll be doing.' In addition, Holiday staff encouraged parent visits to their classrooms and sought to use those opportunities to model how parents could better support their children's learning."<sup>7</sup>

According to Holiday School parents, teachers showed that they care in these ways:

1. "There's a teacher who talks to those kids like he's their father."
2. "The teachers can relate to me. We talk. They listen to what I have to say. It's not like they look down on me."
3. "They're not concerned about just a part of the child, they're concerned about the holistic well-being of the children."
4. The principal "treats everybody in this school as equal. I don't care if you're black, white, Puerto Rican, he don't treat you different. . . . He don't have no racial nothing about him."
5. The principal is "funny, great sense of humor, but he's about the business of educating the children . . . I really admire [him]."<sup>8</sup>

"When I was a teacher, I made home visits. I went with my aide, who spoke Spanish. When the child went home, then I went home with them, because I knew somebody was going to be there who knew that child. That was a really effective way to connect with my families."

*(Pam Miller, retired teacher, Alexandria, Virginia)*





### **Advice from a Principal: Use school support staff**

"We try to use the reading team, psychologists, guidance counselors, the nurse, and social workers. They do workshops for parents about strategies to work with their children and offer MegaSkills workshops that include refreshments and packets of school supplies or learning games to take home."

*(Karl Smith, Ramsey Elementary School, Alexandria, Virginia)*

### ***Establish a Family Center***

The family center can be the place where families and staff can form personal relationships. The Saltonstall School in Salem, Massachusetts, has a family center in a full-size classroom that looks more like someone's home than a schoolroom. A stove, oven, refrigerator, and microwave allow families to fix meals for meetings and get-togethers. Comfortable seating, toys, games, and reading materials make it feel "like home." Family centers are often staffed by the school's Parent Coordinator, but they can also be run by volunteers.

A family center can give a school a whole new approach to engage and inform families. First of all, it's a nonthreatening place to have meetings, workshops, informal discussions, and social exchanges. Here are some activities that family centers have sponsored:

- ◆ A Father's Luncheon, at which over 350 fathers, grandfathers, uncles, brothers, and cousins ate lunch with children, visited classes, and signed up for school activities
- ◆ A "parent presence" that teachers can call upon to visit class and help with students' unruly behavior
- ◆ Food and clothing banks, lending libraries, and health fairs
- ◆ "The Light's On" after-school program promoting students' interest in math, science, art, dance, drama, computers, and foreign languages

## What Is a Family Center?

“Special places in schools where family members can meet, plan, and implement programs, family centers are also places where school staff and community volunteers are invited to collaborate in support of children’s academic and social development. Particularly important to participants in the family center was the *designation* of a special place in schools for families. . . . ‘A place of their own’ for parents in schools . . . represents a significant symbolic and structural change in a school’s relationship with families.”<sup>9</sup>

(Vivian Johnson)

- ◆ Yard sales to make household goods and clothing available to families
- ◆ Talent shows at which parents, students, teachers, and other staff can show off their skills
- ◆ Child care so that families can meet with teachers or help out in class
- ◆ “Coffee with the Principal” on the first Monday of each month
- ◆ Adult and family literacy programs, ESL and citizenship classes, job skills training, and GED programs
- ◆ Parent education workshops on child development and other topics suggested by parents
- ◆ Tutoring, mentoring, and “homework clinics”

Most family centers are located in the schools they serve—in converted storage areas, unused classrooms, ends of hallways, even a former girls’ shower room. When lack of space is a problem, schools have been creative. San Diego transformed a school bus into a Mobile Parent Resource Center, with tables, chairs, a copier, a laminator, and resource materials. Fairfax County, Virginia, has opened a family center in an apartment complex near the school, in a two-bedroom apartment donated by the landlord.

## Steps for Starting a Family Center

1. Find out what your community wants in a family center.
  - Welcome the entire school community to take part.
  - Conduct a needs assessment and map the resources in the school community.
  - Distribute the results to everyone in the school community.
2. Based on the results, develop a plan.
  - Invite everyone to meet to plan a Family Center.
  - Determine goals, tasks, and a time line.
  - Report progress regularly and share ideas frequently.
3. Celebrate the opening and keep planning.
  - Be sure everyone is included when the Family Center opens.
  - Consistently invite participation to create and maintain supportive strategies for the Family Center.<sup>10</sup>

Family centers are just as important in middle and high schools as they are in elementary schools. Where else in a high school could parents go if not to a family center? At all levels, they're a gathering place where families, school staff, students, and community members are welcomed and supported. In middle and high school, students become more involved. They drop in, talk about what's on their minds, ask for advice, and check things out. They see family centers as a place like home, but in school.

For example, a student who's thinking about going to college but doesn't know anyone who has ever gone past high school may stop by to talk it over. Students tell us, "It's different from going to see a guidance counselor; it's more like talking to a friend." At the family center, students

## PRINCIPAL'S STORY:

### “What happened in school today?”

Steve Constantino, a former high school principal, describes a typical scenario at his house:

Everyone is home for dinner, for the first time in three months. Dad the educator is trying to engage the kids.

Dad: “What did you do in school today?”

Answer: “Nothing.”

Dad: “Any homework tonight?”

Answer: “No.”

Steve’s comment: “We have to ask better questions of our children. What hope is there if even I as an educator can’t ask better questions than that? We must have a mechanism to equip parents to ask better questions.”



feel free to talk about their fears and admit what they don’t know. It’s a continuing conversation, not a meeting.

Yes, students in middle and high school tend to want to be more independent. But they say they want their parents to be able to step in and help them if they’re feeling threatened or troubled. When they need to go to a safe place, they want to know where it is.

High school parents need a place to go, too. They often want to talk with someone who’s both friendly and knowledgeable, someone they can confide in and who can help them. Dealing with teenagers is challenging; the family center is a safe place to get advice, support, and information.

The connecting component, placing children’s education at the center, brings the school community together. Parents and staff rally around a goal that is meaningful and important to both. When school staff show parents that they are truly committed to educating their children, parents more readily become loyal advocates of the school. When they work together as *equal* partners in educating children, parents and teachers build trust and understanding. This focus on the children is, in the final

analysis, what keeps parents connected, involved, and feeling like important members of the school community.

The next chapter, "Linking to Learning," discusses in more detail how a school's family involvement program can be retooled to improve student achievement. It takes the ideas about connecting families to what their children are learning, and applies them to specific activities and programs some schools commonly use to engage parents.

## Checklist

### How Family-Friendly Is Your School?

#### WELCOMING ENVIRONMENT

1. Friendly signs inside and out welcome families and visitors and explain how to get around the building.  
 *Already doing this*    *Could do this easily*    *This will take time*    *This will be hard*
2. The school has standards of welcoming behavior that apply to all staff, including bus drivers, security guards, custodians, and cafeteria workers.  
 *Already doing this*    *Could do this easily*    *This will take time*    *This will be hard*
3. Front office staff are friendly—recognize visitors right away, provide information easily, and answer the phone in a way that makes people glad they have called.  
 *Already doing this*    *Could do this easily*    *This will take time*    *This will be hard*
4. There is a comfortable family resource room stocked with books, games, and educational information that families can borrow and where parents can meet.  
 *Already doing this*    *Could do this easily*    *This will take time*    *This will be hard*

## PROGRAMS AND ACTIVITIES TO ENGAGE FAMILIES IN IMPROVING STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT

5. Current student work is displayed throughout the building. Exhibits clearly explain the purpose of the work and the high standards it is to meet.

*Already doing this*    *Could do this easily*    *This will take time*    *This will be hard*

6. All programs and activities for families focus on student achievement—they help families understand what their children are learning and promote high standards.

*Already doing this*    *Could do this easily*    *This will take time*    *This will be hard*

7. Special workshops, learning kits, and other activities show families how to help their children at home—and respond to what families say they want to know about.

*Already doing this*    *Could do this easily*    *This will take time*    *This will be hard*

8. The school reports to parents about student progress and how teachers, parents, and community members can work together to make improvements.

*Already doing this*    *Could do this easily*    *This will take time*    *This will be hard*

## STRONG RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN TEACHERS AND FAMILIES

9. A “joining process” welcomes families to the school, offers tours, makes bilingual speakers available, and introduces them to staff and other families.

*Already doing this*    *Could do this easily*    *This will take time*    *This will be hard*

10. Teachers and families have frequent opportunities to meet face-to-face and get to know each other—class meetings, breakfasts, home visits, class observations.

*Already doing this*    *Could do this easily*    *This will take time*    *This will be hard*

11. Teachers or advisors make personal contact with each family at least once a month.

*Already doing this*    *Could do this easily*    *This will take time*    *This will be hard*

12. A family liaison helps teachers connect to families and bridge barriers of language and culture.

*Already doing this*    *Could do this easily*    *This will take time*    *This will be hard*

## **DEVELOPING FAMILIES' SELF-CONFIDENCE AND POWER**

13. Families are involved in planning how they would like to be involved at the school.

*Already doing this*    *Could do this easily*    *This will take time*    *This will be hard*

14. School committees and the PTA/PTO reflect the diversity of the school community and actively recruit and welcome families from all backgrounds.

*Already doing this*    *Could do this easily*    *This will take time*    *This will be hard*

15. The school is open and accessible—it is easy for parents to meet with the principal, talk to teachers and counselors, and bring up issues and concerns.

*Already doing this*    *Could do this easily*    *This will take time*    *This will be hard*

**Developing  
Relationships**

...

16. Parents develop school improvement projects and do action research—survey other families, observe in classrooms, review materials, and visit other schools and programs.

*Already doing this*    *Could do this easily*    *This will take time*    *This will be hard*

### PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT FOR FAMILIES AND STAFF

17. Families learn how the school system works and how to be an effective advocate for their child.

*Already doing this*    *Could do this easily*    *This will take time*    *This will be hard*

18. Teachers learn about effective approaches to working with families of diverse cultural backgrounds.

*Already doing this*    *Could do this easily*    *This will take time*    *This will be hard*

19. Families and staff have opportunities to learn together how to collaborate to improve student achievement.

*Already doing this*    *Could do this easily*    *This will take time*    *This will be hard*

20. The school reaches out to identify and draw in local community resources that can assist staff and families.

*Already doing this*    *Could do this easily*    *This will take time*    *This will be hard*

Which areas are you doing well in? Which ones will need more work?

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How are parents involved in making the school open, welcoming, and collaborative?

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What are your concerns?

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**Reflection:** What steps could you take to help your school become more family-friendly?

Right away:

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Over the long term:

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## **Brent Campbell Presentation Resource #2**

**Pushor, D. and the Parent Engagement Collaborative. (2013). Portals of promise: Stories of transforming beliefs and practices through a curriculum of parents. Rotterdam, NL: Sense Publishers.**

CEC CHAMBUL

## 5. WELCOMING FROM THE INSIDE OUT – AUTHENTIC HOSPITALITY



*I've learned that people will forget what you said, people will forget what you did, but people will never forget how you made them feel.*

(Maya Angelou)

When I grew up in a close-knit Ukrainian family in rural Saskatchewan, it was instilled in me that family, friends, food, and authentic hospitality were the ingredients that brought people together and kept us strong. Some of my fondest childhood memories take me back to times spent at my grandparents' homes, visiting, eating, and simply being together. I fondly remember that feeling of warmth, safety, and belonging. Looking back, these homes were less than 800 square feet, yet the kitchens/living rooms could magically accommodate over 25 people for dinner and an evening of fun. After dinner, those cozy dwellings would support several conversations,

C. CHAMBUL

numerous games of cards, and many busy, loud children at play. Even during the winter months when going outside was not an option, these homes welcomed us all, wrapped us in warmth and love, leaving us to believe that there was plenty of room to spare.

During those gatherings everyone worked together. There were no set jobs; everyone prepared, cleaned, played, and laughed together. I honour the cultural teachings of my grandparents, parents, and the many teachers who have supported my learning journey helping shape the person I am becoming. Late Lakota Elder Ken Goodwill taught me that "you don't know what you don't know." Life is a journey full of opportunities to build capacity. We all possess gifts, and we simply can not be experts at everything. This statement humbles me and reminds me that working together strengthens us all.

Generations of families have gathered just like we did. These gatherings still remain a part of our family's legacy. Some things have changed, unfortunately my grandparents have passed, yet their lessons remain strong, and the memories they created are vivid and often shared and modelled with a younger generation during our times together. While our homes are larger, the kitchen remains the primary gathering space. We do not get together as often as we once did because we are a global family, but one thing remains the same. When we are together, the feeling of connectedness remains as strong as it did when we gathered at our grandparents' homes. Our gathering space is as welcoming and accommodating as the homes we gathered in as children.

How many times have you attended a social get-together where everyone simply "hangs out" in the kitchen while the remainder of the house remains empty? Have you ever hosted an outdoor party where the deck or patio is full to capacity while the other intimate spaces that you spent hours preparing remain vacant? Through observation and experience I have come to appreciate that we are social beings who crave a physical closeness and connectedness. We feel secure and grounded when we are having fun, enjoying each others company, and experiencing authentic hospitality.

During my time as a community school coordinator<sup>1</sup> I have heard the term "food is friendly." I have to agree with this statement, but I have learned that even food needs to have an authenticity that is clearly defined. I remember learning this valuable lesson from a parent at a school function who shared that food is only friendly when it is given freely without a veiled purpose. Parent Jackie D stated that "we know when food is used as a bribe, so my family does not attend when there is a string attached" (Personal Conversation, 2009). This was one of those powerful statements that constantly reminds me to consider the purpose of serving food at a school gathering. Is the practice based on some hidden agenda or is the genuine? Guests know the difference!

I use my grandmothers' and mother's teachings as my filter. These amazing women modeled authentic hospitality as coming from within. It is "heart work" sincere and gentle, with no expectations or hidden intentions. Hospitality is friend

and without prejudice, it is inclusive and culturally responsive. Hosts consider their guests; they pay attention to details and create safe, welcoming environments that facilitate conversation and fun. Through authentic hospitality we cultivate and strengthen respectful relationships that invite fun, laughter, and a feeling of connectedness where jobs are shared and the tone is relaxed.

In a perfect world, school gatherings would replicate family visits at my grandmothers' homes, where we all were genuinely welcomed. We were in close physical proximity to each other, felt included, had fun, all talked to each other (often at the same time), felt safe, worked together, played together, felt loved, appreciated, and special. The food was delicious, plentiful and prepared with love – rather than with a hidden agenda.

This past year I experienced a “Meet the Community” supper hosted at my new school that would rival any family gathering. This September evening gathering was simple; it was hosted on the front lawn of the school. (I must confess that when our principal proposed this venue I was sceptical; the space was small, not a lot of room for everyone to spread out.) Invitations were personally extended in the halls, through notes home, phone calls, home visits, posters and they included the business community. The menu was basic but it was culturally responsive, honouring all palates. As I stole a moment to marvel at the hundreds of people who had dropped by to share a meal, shake a hand, and enjoy each other's company, I was transported back to my grandparents' homes. I felt the same connectedness, joy, and sense of contentment.

As I took a mental snap shot of the scene before me, I witnessed a beautiful kaleidoscope; people from many countries of origin gathered; talking, laughing, and “breaking bread” together. There was no set agenda, parents/caregivers did not have to meet their children's teachers, there were no tokens or tickets to claim their meals, and there was no set program to introduce staff, or to outline processes, protocols, or curriculum. There was authentic hospitality on a warm September evening that welcomed anyone who wanted to join us on the front lawn of the school. Some families invited extended family to join them; personnel from many support agencies, business partners and members of the school board office staff attended. Many community members who did not have children attending the school also congregated to join in the fellowship. This was truly an exquisite evening of coming together, getting to know each other, celebrating the spirit of a community school family.

For those who were reluctant to enter the school whether due to past traumatic experience or personally perceived shortcomings, hosting the gathering outside the school provided a “soft landing” (Bousquet, personal conversation, 2002), affording time and space for some before they crossed the school's threshold. The lawn was neutral space. For families who wanted to explore the school, the doors were open and families were welcome to wander the halls and visit inclusive classrooms at their leisure, on their terms. Students were often the ones who facilitated the introduction between school staff and family members, yet most introductions were seamless,

occurring serendipitously without formality. The joyful atmosphere lent itself to relationship building and connectedness. As I took another minute to listen to the hum, I heard a "joyful noise"; people talking, laughing, the ketchup and mustard stained faces of children who were running and squealing with delight. I remember feeling like I was among family; comparable to a family wedding or reunion.

At the beginning of the evening, staff cooked and served. However, by the end of the evening jobs had blurred. Community was working alongside staff. People were cooking, serving and cleaning together. There were no assigned jobs, everyone just pitched in. There was a sense of "we're all in this together" – perhaps this is a prairie attitude or perhaps the result of a community experiencing authentic engagement; it was a community school family coming together to work in the best interests of all its members.

Time passed quickly. Within what seemed only a few minutes the evening was over. No evidence remained of the hundreds who had gathered to meet, eat, laugh, share hopes and dreams, and celebrate a community school family of learners. The lawn was green, no litter remained. The night was still, yet as I looked around at the school garden, the lawn, and the flower beds, I saw them differently from before; there was a spirit – a positive community vibe filled with hope. This feeling was reminiscent of how I feel after hosting a successful house party. It also took me back to when I would leave my grandparents home after an evening with family. I was tired, full of love, contentment, and filled with a sense of belonging. I was optimistic with the promise of good things to come. I hoped that all who attended our Meet the Community evening felt similarly as they reflected on the event.

As I replay the evening in my mind's eye and invite the emotions to dance on my heart. I am struck by a statement by Debbie Pushor (2010) years earlier:

When children come to us in schools, they are already living multiple identities: as a grandchild, a daughter or son, a sister or brother, a nephew or a niece; as orphaned, detained, or wards of the system; as situated in neighbourhoods, Reserves, on the streets, or in other geographical locations; as members of racial, cultural, religious, or economic groups; and as members of other chosen communities. When they come to school, they come with this multiplicity and contextuality, not independent of it. In both direct and indirect ways, they bring their [parents], families and communities with them. (p. 7)

As I further contemplate this statement I realize that I too bring my family, the teachings, assumptions, beliefs, and culture. I realize just how important it is to acknowledge, value and, in some cases, unlearn what I carry in my bundle. I have shared this gift with me and have modelled its significance. I have learned from the "beginning in a good way" (Traditional Knowledge Keeper Don Speidel, 2005) that a place of heart and respect is how I want to begin a journey of genuine relations and commitment. I welcome, and honour the "multiple identities" of all stakeholders on the school landscape.

## WELCOMING FROM THE INSIDE OUT – AUTHENTIC HOSPITALITY

I do not profess to have all of the answers. All too often, I have been humbled by just how little I actually know. However, I believe strongly in the power of relationship. I believe in taking the time to come alongside to seek better understanding, see things through their lens, hear their stories, hopes, and dreams, and acknowledge their gifts. Authentic hospitality invites genuine human bonds that are honest, reciprocal, culturally responsive, inclusive, healing, and joyful. I appreciate that sometimes we need to consider the intent of coming together. If hospitality comes with an agenda it is not honest or legitimate; often guests' attendance is superficial, or they chose not to participate at all. Working from the heart is often difficult work; it means paying attention to subtleties, being intuitive to those you serve, often taking risks and most importantly, giving of yourself and your time. Those are the teachings of my grandmothers and mother; they have served me well in both my personal and professional life. I try to model this belief in the way I live, work, and play.

Thank you for taking the time to read my story.

### NOTE

<sup>1</sup> A community school coordinator works to support all stakeholders on the school landscape; strengthening relationships between the home, school, and the community at large.

### REFERENCE

Pushor, D. (2010). Are schools doing enough to learn about families? In M. Miller Marsh & T. Turner Vorbeck (Eds.), *(Mis)Understanding families: Learning from real families in our schools* (pp. 4–16). New York, NY: Teachers College Press.