

# School-Family Engagement: Staff Preparation and Support Are Vital

*All school personnel—teachers, education support professionals, and administrators—have a role in promoting family-school-community partnerships. To maximize these efforts, educators must have essential supports, including pre-service training, clinical experiences, professional development, and time to collaborate.*

—NEA President Dennis Van Roekel

**S**trengthening the bond between schools, families, and communities is a critical factor in raising student achievement, closing achievement gaps, and attaining school improvement goals. The research is clear, consistent, and convincing: Engaged families and communities have a positive impact on students' academic achievement, attitudes, and aspirations. Teachers, administrators, and school staff need to connect with parents and others in the community.<sup>1</sup> After 30 years of careful examination, researchers and practitioners have concluded that family engagement and community support are common features of high performing schools, and that such engagement and support benefit all students regardless of family income, education, or background.<sup>2</sup>

It can be difficult for school personnel to engage family members in the face of challenges such as parents' demanding schedules, language or cultural differences, or difficult past experiences with school. Some parents have said they lack the know-how and resources to help their child, and some express frustration with school bureaucracies or policies they find hard to understand or change. Some feel that school personnel don't understand the plight of single parents, grandparents, foster parents, or other caregivers. And some simply lack transportation to attend school events or child care for younger siblings.

## Essential skills and knowledge

Fortunately, teachers, administrators, and support staff can take steps to overcome common barriers and engage with students' families. However, school personnel need to employ a wide range of skills to help make information accessible, understand cultural differences, find ways to reach out to families, and involve local communities.

How can education professionals acquire the skills they need to form effective partnerships with the adults in students' homes and communities? At the pre-service level, programs that prepare new teachers, administrators, and support staff need to do more to integrate family engagement skills into their curricula. Learning family engagement skills is essential, whether one's pathway into the profession involves community college, university-based training, or an alternative route. And veteran educators need effective professional development opportunities to acquire and enhance the skills they need to engage parents who face roadblocks to school involvement.

Educators, policymakers, and professional organizations that represent educators must take steps to help facilitate collaboration between home and school. Indeed, partnership-building needs to be a policy priority at the local, state and national levels. Policies should support education initiatives at the pre-service level as well as professional development for veteran educators.

## What can schools of education do?

Federal education officials, national accrediting bodies, and many researchers and practitioners have all concluded in recent years that pre-service programs, as a whole, are doing far too little to prepare school personnel to engage with families and communities.<sup>3,4,5</sup> Education faculty, professional organizations, teacher candidates and other stakeholders have shown interest in making family engagement a stronger facet of pre-service programs. New teachers have identified engaging families as the number one area where they believe they should have had more preparation.<sup>6</sup>

Although some pre-service programs teach family engagement skills, very few address parent-school-community collaboration beyond the topics of parent conferences and legal requirements for parent interaction in the

Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) and the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). Some universities offer a course in parent involvement, but such courses are often required only for those who plan to teach special education or early childhood education students.<sup>7</sup>

Research clearly shows the value of keeping parents engaged as their children move up the grades. Pre-service programs need to prepare school personnel to engage with parents of all students throughout the elementary and secondary school years. At all grade levels, schools need to form partnerships with families and with the local community.

Studies find that teacher education courses that deal with parent engagement issues and practices are clearly effective. For example, a study of graduates from teacher education programs that address parent involvement in curricula found that the new teachers felt prepared for the challenges they later faced and were engaged in a variety of parent involvement practices.<sup>8,9</sup>

At first glance, it may appear that schools of education could easily integrate parent, family, and community engagement into their curricula. However, education faculties face several competing priorities on campus, from budget decreases to expanding federal and state mandates. For example, at some colleges and universities, policies governing academic major declaration or limitations on education coursework can make it difficult to integrate new subject areas into the curriculum. Integrating new subject matter into existing courses is a good first step. Teacher candidates also need opportunities for clinical experience.

### Are pre-service standards gaining ground?

Recognizing the need for thorough pre-service preparation, growing numbers of states and school districts have been adopting standards involving engagement with families. In 1994, only 22 states included parent engagement skills in their licensing standards. By 2010, 41 states had adopted licensure requirements that include parent, family, and community components. Furthermore, the PTA's National Standards for Family-School Partnerships has been endorsed or supported by departments of education in every state and by 76 national education organizations.

Nationally, about 700 of the 1,300 or more education programs that prepare school personnel are accredited by

the National Council for the Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE). NCATE standards specifically mention the importance of preparing education candidates to collaborate with parents and work with communities. Forty states either require their teacher-preparation institutions to be NCATE-accredited or use NCATE or similar standards to evaluate institutions that do not seek NCATE accreditation.

NCATE has cited Connecticut-based CommPACT (COMMunity, Parents, Administrators, Children, and Teachers) as a national model for teacher preparation programs. CommPACT, a partnership involving seven urban elementary and middle schools, grew out of a statewide coalition of groups including teacher unions, superintendents, principals and others. The University of Connecticut's School of Education serves as its hub.

CommPACT offers a new model for school reform in Connecticut built on the collaborative efforts of teachers, children, administrators, parents, and the community. Recently, one CommPACT school changed the times of its bi-monthly steering committee meetings to suit parents' schedules and offered to help with transportation to the meetings. Another CommPACT school's "Family and Community" cadre produced a brochure to help clarify school procedures and policies and has been looking for ways to engage more parents in the work of the school.

NCATE also recognizes exemplary programs offered by Penn State University, the University of San Diego, the University of Cincinnati, and the Tennessee Board of Regents.

While some colleges of education have made great strides in building comprehensive training and clinical experiences in parent, family, community engagement, much more needs to be done. Statewide adoption of NCATE standards can be an important first step.

In November 2009, the NEA Foundation awarded CommPACT a second-year research grant through its Closing the Achievement Gaps Initiative. Harriet Sanford, president and CEO of the NEA Foundation, has called CommPACT "a collaboration that is grounded in research on best practices, driven by educators, supported by the community, and focused on improving student performance and creating sustainable systemic reform."

### How can professional development support collaboration?

It is not enough just to prepare new educators to engage effectively with parents and others. Veteran teachers, principals, and school support staff need ongoing opportunities to strengthen their knowledge and skills in working with families. Parent, family, and community engagement needs to be an integral part of ongoing professional development programs.

The payoff is clear: engaging families is a critical factor in student achievement. But engaging families and working with diverse populations is an ongoing challenge for school personnel. It requires more than just on-the-job training or a single workshop. High quality, sustained professional development can foster the collaborative skills that school personnel increasingly need for effectively engaging parents and others in the community.

According to Hayes Mizell, a leading staff development expert, “Effective professional development enables educators to develop the knowledge and skills they need to address students’ learning challenges. To be effective, professional development requires thoughtful planning followed by careful implementation with feedback to ensure it responds to educators’ learning needs.”<sup>10</sup>

Collaboration is a specific focus on one of the 10 Model Core Teaching Standards developed by the Interstate New Teacher Assessment and Support Consortium (InTASC). According to InTASC Standard #10, “The teacher seeks appropriate leadership roles and opportunities to take responsibility for student learning, to collaborate with learners, families, colleagues, other school professionals, and community members to ensure learner growth, and to advance the profession.”<sup>11</sup>

The Center for Law and Social Policy (CLASP) advocates for policies and laws that support comprehensive professional development to assure high quality early education programs from birth through age 5, particularly for low-income families. For example, CLASP supported a provision in the 2010 Affordable Care Act that expands funding for early childhood home visitation services.<sup>12</sup>

Several states and professional organizations have adopted family engagement standards to give educators, policymakers, and parents a clear picture of how proven family engagement strategies can drive pre-service, professional development, and school improvement efforts. Cali-

fornia, Maryland, and North Carolina now include parental engagement in their professional development standards for both beginning and veteran school personnel. Several states have codified the PTA’s National Standards for Family-School Partnerships into state law or policy.

Learning Forward, formerly the National Staff Development Council (NSDC), includes collaboration skills as one of its professional development standards, which have been adopted in 40 states. The standard says, “Staff development that improves the learning of all students provides educators with knowledge and skills to collaborate.”<sup>13</sup>

Community engagement is one of many areas in which candidates for National Board Certification must demonstrate professional accomplishment, as required by The National Board for Professional Teaching Standards (NBPTS). Nearly 40 states and numerous local governments have adopted legislation that provides support or incentives for teachers who pursue or achieve National Board Certification. Many organizations support the work of NBPTS, including American Association of School Administrators (AASA), the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO), the National Conference of State Legislatures (NCSL), the National School Boards Association (NSBA), and the National Association of State Boards of Education (NASBE).

Schools in the National Network of Partnership Schools, based at Johns Hopkins University, use an “action team” approach to support parental involvement, family engagement, and community partnerships. And the California-based Parent-Teacher Home Visit Project has been adopted in several states. Schools and districts use it as a model for family engagement that builds trust and respect between home and school, encourages cultural awareness, supports professional learning among teachers, and encourages active parental engagement.

### Recommendations for policymakers

NEA believes that all school employees have a role in actively engaging parents, families, and community stakeholders in students’ academic life. Teachers, administrators and education support personnel must have the skills and confidence to develop and sustain partnerships with parents and family members from a variety of linguistic and cultural backgrounds. By integrating family engagement issues into in pre-service programs and professional

development for teachers, principals, and support staff, it will be possible to ensure that all school personnel gain the skills they need to engage families in ways that support student learning.

To expand the potential for school personnel to collaborate with students' families, understand diverse cultures, and engage with local communities, NEA recommends the following policy initiatives at the state and local level:

- **Support efforts to expand the capacity of college of education faculty and professional development specialists** to train current and future teachers, principals, and support staff in effective ways of partnering with families and other community members.
- **Support collaborative efforts between state departments of education, local school systems, community colleges, and higher education institutions.** By working together, these groups can ensure that parent, family, and community engagement is addressed in all teacher and administrator preparation programs and education support staff training programs. Support for these collaborations should include funding to develop effective home-school and school-community partnership models and to support extensive pre-service clinical experiences in schools.
- **Allocate funds for professional development programs** that make parent, family and community engagement an integral component of student achievement and school improvement goals. Such programs should be available for all school personnel.
- **Encourage opportunities for school staffs** to engage in school-family-community partnerships by funding models such as the National Network of Partnership Schools and the Parent-Teacher Home Visit Project.
- **Support efforts to retain highly trained personnel** by enacting or reinstating policies that provide funding and other incentives for National Board for Professional Teaching Standards (NBPTS) candidates and National Board Certified professionals
- **Adopt professional standards** for pre-service programs, induction, professional development, and school employee licensure. Standards-setting organizations include NCATE, InTASC, Learning Forward, and NBPTS. Adopting such standards in every state could serve as a first step toward assuring that research-based programming and proven practices will be implemented nationwide.
- **Revise professional development policies** as needed to ensure alignment with state professional standards.
- **Require periodic data collection, evaluation, and reporting** to assess the effectiveness of professional learning experiences for school personnel.

In addition, NEA recommends the following initiatives at the national level:

- **Support and sustain a clearinghouse for information, resources, and research** on models and best practices for preparing school staff in family and community engagement.
- **Advocate changes in federal regulations and legislation, including the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA),** to assure that pre-service curricula and professional development for all school personnel will support effective school-family-community partnerships. Also monitor competitive grant specifications to assure that they support effective partnerships.
- **Support efforts to expand the capacity of college of education faculty and professional development specialists** to train current and future teachers, principals, and support staff in effective ways of partnering with families and other community members.

## Resources

NCATE's report, "Blue Ribbon Panel on Clinical Preparation and Partnerships for Improved Student Learning" (2010), made sweeping recommendations for reforming the accreditation of teacher preparation programs, and calls for evidence of the impact that college of education graduates have on the classroom. [www.ncate.org/Public/ResearchReports/NCATEInitiatives/BlueRibbonPanel/tab-id/715/Default.aspx](http://www.ncate.org/Public/ResearchReports/NCATEInitiatives/BlueRibbonPanel/tab-id/715/Default.aspx). NEA Secretary-Treasurer Becky Pringle was a member of this panel. NEA endorses the Blue Ribbon Panel report. [www.nea.org/home/41597.htm](http://www.nea.org/home/41597.htm)

"The Teacher-Parent Relationship: Using Professional Development to Improve Family and Community Engagement," Harvard Family Research Project Webinar Series, Achieving Excellence and Innovation in Family, School, and Community Engagement, November 18, 2010. [www.hfrp.org/family-involvement/projects](http://www.hfrp.org/family-involvement/projects)

The Phoebe Apperson Hearst Family-School Partnership Awards. National PTA created this awards program to showcase schools and communities, through a nationally accredited method, for achieving the National Standards for Family-School Partnerships. [www.pta.org/picer](http://www.pta.org/picer)

"State Laws on Family Engagement in Education: National PTA Reference Guide." The National PTA developed this publication as a tool for State PTAs and other family and child advocates to increase systemic, effective family engagement in all U.S. public schools. [www.pta.org/3717.asp](http://www.pta.org/3717.asp)

"National Standards for Family-School Partnerships." The PTA's national standards reflect current research and shift the focus from what schools should do to involve parents to what parents, schools, and communities can do together to improve parent and community involvement and support student success. [www.pta.org/national\\_standards.asp](http://www.pta.org/national_standards.asp)

"National Standards for Family-School Partnerships Implementation Guide." For each of the six National Standards for Family-School Partnerships, this online guide provides: an explanation of each standard and its importance; insights to help convince educators of the standard's value; a success story from a school community; action steps for the school community; and further resources. [www.pta.org/2757.asp](http://www.pta.org/2757.asp)

## References

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- <sup>2</sup> Jeynes, W.H. 2003. "A meta-analysis: The effects of parental involvement on minority children's academic achievement." *Education & Urban Society* 35(2): 202-218.
- <sup>3</sup> U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan in a speech at Columbia, University, October 22, 2009. [www2.ed.gov/news/speeches/2009/10/10222009.html](http://www2.ed.gov/news/speeches/2009/10/10222009.html)
- <sup>4</sup> National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE). June, 2009. NCATE president, Jim Cibulka, announced the first major revision of teacher education requirements in 10 years. It includes new accreditation requirements that will oblige institutions to strengthen the clinical focus of their programs and foster demonstrable increases in student learning. [www.ncate.org](http://www.ncate.org)
- <sup>5</sup> *The American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education (AACTE) and its 800 colleges and universities have focused on reshaping pre-service education leading to substantial increases in student achievement. AACTE has also launched a series of new programs and initiatives designed to improve teacher effectiveness.* <http://aacte.org>.
- <sup>6</sup> MetLife. 2005. *The MetLife survey of the American teacher, 2004-2005: Transitions and the role of supportive relationships.* New York: Author.
- <sup>7</sup> Hiatt-Michael, Diana B. 2003. "Preparing Teachers for Parental Involvement: Current Practices and Possibilities Across the Nation." *Threshold in Education*, Vol. XXX:2.
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- <sup>9</sup> Chavkin, Nancy Feil. 2005. "Strategies for Preparing Educators to Enhance Involvement of Diverse Families in Their Children's Education." *Multicultural Education*. [www.highbeam.com/doc/1P3-977253381.html](http://www.highbeam.com/doc/1P3-977253381.html).
- <sup>10</sup> Mizell, Hayes. 2010. "Why Professional Development Matters," p. 10. Learning Forward (formerly the National Staff Development Council). [www.learningforward.org/advancing/Why\\_PD\\_Matters\\_Web.pdf](http://www.learningforward.org/advancing/Why_PD_Matters_Web.pdf)
- <sup>11</sup> Interstate New Teacher Assessment and Support Consortium (InTASC): *InTASC Model Teaching Standards: A Resource for State Dialog*, March 2011. Council of Chief State School Officers. [www.ccsso.org/resources/programs/interstate\\_teacher\\_assessment\\_consortium\\_\(intasc\).html](http://www.ccsso.org/resources/programs/interstate_teacher_assessment_consortium_(intasc).html).
- <sup>12</sup> Center for Law and Social Policy (CLASP). [www.clasp.org](http://www.clasp.org).
- <sup>13</sup> Learning Forward (formerly the National Staff Development Council): *NSDC's Standards for Staff Development*. [www.learningforward.org/standards/collaborationskills.cfm](http://www.learningforward.org/standards/collaborationskills.cfm)

