



# NCPIE Update

*Building family-school partnerships that work*

*A Publication of the National Coalition for Parent Involvement in Education*

*Sept.-Oct. 2006*

## ***A Closer Look at Appleseed's Latest Report: It Takes a Parent: Transforming Education in the Wake of No Child Left Behind***



It is time to match our words with action. At least that is the conclusion of Appleseed's recent report examining federal, state and local policies and practices on parental involvement as it relates to the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB). Appleseed's goal is to promote more effective parent involvement practices. The report supports Appleseed's belief that the effort to inform and engage parents about their children's education so they can be better *consumers* of public education is a core construct of the NCLB law. This issue of the NCPIE Update is an overview of the report that highlights the reports major themes, findings, and recommendations for action.

Based on extensive research and interviews in 18 school districts in six states, including dozens of interviews with education leaders and community-based organizations, and two-dozen parent focus groups, below please find an overview of the major themes, findings and recommendations in Appleseed's report.

### **Three Major Themes Revealed:**

1. Schools and districts do not universally embrace parental involvement as a central strategy for accomplishing academic gains. This pattern appears to result from a mix of causes:

- The challenge of defining clear and meaningful benchmarks by which effective parental involvement can be evaluated;
  - A preoccupation with the accountability elements of NCLB, such as testing and teacher quality; and
  - A lack of awareness and training on how to effectively engage parents.

2. There is less of a need for "new rules" and more of a need that existing laws be fully understood, supported and implemented. Although some recommendations in the report address gaps in present law, most recommendations document the need for federal, state, district and school officials to better implement the laws that presently exist.

3. Despite challenges, a number of notable practices and models with real promise have emerged.

### **About Appleseed**

Appleseed is a nonprofit organization dedicated to building a **just society**. The organization works to promote a society in which opportunities are genuine, access to the law is universal and equal, and power is used to advance the public interest. It believes that the best way to achieve big results is to work for the kind of change that levels the playing field and transforms entire communities one at a time.

At the local level, Appleseed works at establishing and networking independent public interest law centers that identify and address issues community-by-community. As one of the nation's largest legal pro bono networks, our Appleseed Centers develop practical and lasting solutions to chronic injustices in public education, health care, child welfare, justice, and immigration.

At the national level Appleseed's role is to organize, support, and connect the local Appleseed Centers. In addition to providing start-up funding and staffing, and recruiting leadership to get new Centers off the ground, the national office connects the individual centers and coordinates their efforts to have a more widespread impact. The national Appleseed organization organizes, supports, and connects the local Appleseed Centers. In addition to providing start-up funding and staffing, and recruiting leadership to get new Centers off the ground, the national office connects the individual centers and coordinates their

### **The Findings:**

1. Too many parents fail to receive clear and timely information about their children and their schools.
2. Poverty, limited English proficiency, and varying cultural expectations are among the biggest barriers to parental involvement.
3. Poor communication with parents hinders their ability to exercise NCLB's choice and supplemental education services options.
4. Creative, multi-faceted communication and engagement strategies can promote better parental involvement in schools.
5. Parental involvement is not uniformly valued by school leaders as a key accountability strategy.

## **The Call to Action: Appleseed's Recommendations**

### **Recommendation 1: Quality of Information**

States, districts and schools must provide meaningful, understandable and timely information to parents regarding key school and student performance data.

*The Challenge:* Providing parents with information about student and school performance in reports that are timely and easily understood.

*Steps to Success:* In their efforts to report student and school data, states, districts and schools should directly address the interests of parents. This means that they must:

Provide clear information that explains the meaning and intended use of performance data. Ensure that reports of school and district performance are presented in ways that provide clear information and explain their meaning.

Take steps to provide appropriate interpretations of testing data, which should describe in simple language:

- What the test has covered;
- What scores mean and do not mean;
- How the scores will be used by the school, district or state (including specific consequences associated with the results, if any); and
- What steps parents should take with the data.

As it relates to timeliness of information, state, districts and schools should factor in issues of timely response when making test administration decisions. A central factor to consider with respect to test administration decisions is whether parents, teachers and school officials receive test results in ample time to make use of them in the classroom and at home, as well as to make decisions about parental options under NCLB.

### **Recommendation 2: Proactive, Targeted Engagement Strategies**

Districts and schools must pursue multiple, proactive strategies for communicating with and engaging parents—particularly parents who are low-income or whose first language is not English.

*The Challenge:* Just as a one-size-fits-all strategy is not effective when teaching students, neither is it effective when communicating with parents. This is especially true given the increasingly diverse population served by U.S. schools. Many parents lack basic knowledge about the avenues within schools that they can pursue to become better informed about their children's education. Many schools intentionally or not, send the message that they do not want parents to participate—or to participate only in very limited ways. Moreover, school officials, teachers and counselors frequently have workloads that limit their ability to effectively connect with parents, requiring the support of organizations that can supplement their efforts.

#### *Steps to Success*

Schools must demonstrate to all parents that they are welcome at school. Holding meetings and having office hours at convenient times for parents to meet with teachers or principals are important first steps. Making available services that draw parents in – nutrition, or adult literacy classes, for example – and allowing community organizations to use schools facilities will help make schools feel more open to parents. In addition, the use of parent resource rooms, where parents can get information on successful

school plans, use computers, meet other parents or meet with teachers and administrators can help open doors. Ultimately, principals must send the message in their communications and actions and through their faculty and staff that parents are part of the school community.

When communicating important information, schools and districts should use several different methods to reach parents – in writing, by telephone, television and the Internet; through one-on-one and group meetings at school; and through community partners. Districts and schools should:

- Translate written materials and provide interpreter services. Newsletters, website and other communications translated into appropriate languages are critically important in reaching language-minority parents.
- Signs displayed at the school and other modes of basic communication also should be posted in multiple languages, in part to communicate that parents from all backgrounds are welcome.
- Reach out beyond school house doors. To overcome parents' distrust and limited experience in being educated advocates, school officials should work with community organizations that reach low-income or language-minority families.
- Educators and administrators should leave their buildings to connect with families at their homes or at community events and centers.
- Invest in training parents who can facilitate communications. Schools and districts should invest in efforts to provide parents with tools for access to school information and train them in ways to engage school officials and become effective advocates for their children.
- Hold "parent academies" or study circles to provide background to parents, to actively solicit their feedback, and to break down barriers between parents and school official.

These strategies can be especially important in creating greater understanding and trust across lines of race, ethnicity, and socioeconomic groups. Just as teachers and administrators need training to prepare them to work with parents, parents, too, often need help to prepare them to support their children's education.

### **Recommendation 3: Community Support.**

Districts and schools should leverage their own limited resources by engaging community organizations.

*The Challenge:* The role community organizations serve in supporting parents, which can lead to improved student achievement and school success, is sometimes overlooked in conversations about the critical connection between effective parent involvement and student success. As the findings reflect, many economically disadvantaged or non-English-speaking parents lack the skills or resources to effectively engage with schools or serve as their child's advocate.

School officials note, however, that school resources are stretched. In addition, parents often do not trust or feel connected with or understood by their schools. This reality in no small part explains the nearly universal acknowledgement by educators, parent groups and community groups about the vital impact that supporting trusted community organizations can have in helping students and schools succeed.

*Steps to Success:* Districts and schools should include as part of any parental engagement strategy a focus on community outreach. To help build bridges and to leverage their own resources, districts and schools should:

- Evaluate student needs and available resources. Before making connections between supporting community organizations and student needs, schools must identify those needs and the resources that can help meet them.
- The first step in leveraging community support is evaluating the needs of students and the kinds of resources that are available to meet them.
- Ensure that staff is charged with making community connections. Districts and schools should clearly designate individuals who are responsible for making the necessary connections between community resources and student/parent needs. Their role should involve collaboration with

other district and school leaders, as well as with community leaders and stakeholders, including parents.

- Develop clear areas of responsibility and measure results. Staff positions that involve community outreach should have clear goals and expected outcomes, connected with other efforts to help improve student performance.

Any outreach and services coordination plan should be fully integrated and aligned with the district's overall accountability plan.

#### **Recommendation 4: Professional Development**

Federal, state and district officials need to prioritize and fund more comprehensive professional development for teachers and administrators, with special emphasis on challenges of culture and language.

*The Challenge:* The connection between parent and teacher and, often, parent and principal is vital in helping students reach their potential in the classroom. Too frequently, however, teachers and principals lack the necessary background and training, particularly in settings where they do not share a common cultural heritage with parents. A recurring theme in parent focus group conversations and among education leaders was the desire to better connect, but with the frustration in not knowing the best strategies to effectively do so. Frequently, the absence of good training (pre-service or in-service) was identified as a major missing ingredient.

*Steps to Success:* Make training a priority.

The importance of parent involvement, and effective strategies for engaging parents in their children's education, should represent significant strands of instruction in schools of education and educational administration, as well as on the-job professional development. Special emphasis should be placed on helping teachers and administrators understand a variety of cultural contexts and convey a welcoming environment that invites all parents to lend their support.

Provide federal incentives for training. As a matter of federal policy, Congress should ensure that all teacher and principal training funded with federal money includes attention to engaging and dealing effectively with parents, with a focus on cultural understanding and strategies to generate support at home for student learning.

Evaluate teachers and administrators on parental involvement. Criteria for evaluations reflect a judgment about what is important in job performance. Leaving out parent involvement sends a message that it is not a priority for school personnel. The same is true of state licensure standards, which reflect key job qualifications. States and districts should demonstrate the importance of teachers' and administrators' role in fostering parental involvement by establishing professional development and performance, criteria associated with parental involvement.

#### **Recommendation 5: Better Implementation and Stronger Accountability**

Federal, state and local policymakers and educators should recognize parental involvement as central to school improvement and place parental involvement strategies on par with other steps taken to improve student achievement.

*The Challenge:* The elements of NCLB (and its predecessor statutes) designed to give parents more of a role in their children's education have not been fully implemented. A more robust focus on parental involvement as a core accountability strategy has been impeded by a combination of factors, including an absence of clear understanding regarding effective ways to engage parents to promote better student achievement; the uncertainty regarding the ways to best measure success with respect to parental involvement; and a preoccupation with other elements of accountability that lend themselves to clearer criteria for evaluation.

These factors have, no doubt, contributed to the focus of the U.S. Department of Education, which in turn has resulted in a parallel focus in state departments of education, districts and schools. Although parental involvement has been the focus of some Department oversight and monitoring, the stronger emphasis on other elements of accountability has relegated parental involvement to back-burner status for many district and state leaders. As a result, discussions of parental involvement tend to address it as isolated or as an end in itself and of secondary importance – rather than as integral to a well-designed accountability system.

*Steps to Success:* As with most issues of importance in education, strong leadership at the state, district and school levels is required if the promise of parental involvement is to be realized. This means, among other things, that:

1. Districts and schools (with state and federal investment and support) should:

- Work to associate key parental engagement strategies with accountability goals so that parental involvement strategies (like testing strategies) become a key part of the ongoing school reform process. Leaders of schools that are designated for school improvement, corrective action or restructuring should view this designation as an opportunity to enlist parents in turning around the school, including negotiating and agreeing to school improvement or corrective action plans with parents and community organizations that represent them.

- Have good answers to these key questions:

- Goals: How are parental involvement strategies designed to help improve student learning and school/district performance?

- Objectives: By what measures will school/district parental involvement strategies be evaluated? How often will the evaluation occur? Who is responsible for follow-up?

- Strategies: How are parental involvement strategies incorporated and aligned with other strategies designed to promote better student achievement and school/district performance? Are connections made with testing, school safety, attendance, etc.?

2. State educational agencies should:

- Include training in parental involvement strategies as a key component of their statewide system of support for districts and schools in improvement, and ensure that, in particular, school support teams include individuals able to train administrators and teachers in effective parental involvement approaches.

- Develop effective toolkits, notices, and networking systems to facilitate the adoption of effective parental involvement strategies by local districts.

3. The U.S. Department of Education should:

- Expand its efforts to assess the effectiveness of parental involvement strategies and efforts. Specifically, it should include in its parental involvement monitoring framework:

- an evaluation of the nature and scope of parent involvement in the school improvement and planning process;

- an evaluation of how and in what amount federal funds are spent for parental involvement activities, and with what outcomes;

- an evaluation of school and district report cards and parent notices;

- an evaluation of the state process for review of the content and timing of required parent SES and choice notifications, including the manner in which states are prepared to (and do) respond quickly when allegations of untimely and insufficient notices to parents are lodged; and

- an evaluation of how states and districts use school choice and SES enrollment data to examine and refine, as necessary, their strategies for notifying parents and enrolling students.

- Monitor implementation of parent involvement provisions by, at a minimum, requiring information on parent involvement in Consolidated State Performance Reports. The reports should include information on use of the one percent of Title I funds required to be set aside for parent involvement activities; the percentages of Title I schools with parent involvement policies and with school-parent compacts; the percentages of schools with parent coordinators; and, for schools with school improvement or corrective action plans, the role of parents and community groups representing parents in consulting on and developing the plan.
- Provide research-based guidance to states and districts on successful parental communication and enforcement strategies.

4. Congress, in its reauthorization of the law that NCLB currently amends, should take several steps to promote more effective and educationally appropriate parental options. It should:

- Provide for an expanded role for parents in the school improvement process, including creating more detailed directives about the role parents will play in the development and implementation of any school improvement plans.
- Provide for and fund a more strategic, focused role for Parent Information Resource Centers (PIRCs), to concentrate on working with states and districts to strengthen and monitor parent involvement activities, make parental involvement activities an integral part of their strategic school-reform efforts, and build ties between schools and community groups representing and working with parents.
- Promote effective district and SES provider collaboration, as well as district and school “ownership” of SES, by requiring:
  - Districts and providers to: (1) cooperatively engage parents in the development of individual learning plans and in ongoing monitoring of student progress; and (2) exchange relevant student/classroom data through out the delivery of SES services; and
  - Schools to incorporate SES as an integral part of their Title I school improvement plans, including addressing how those services will be leveraged to improve school performance.

## **Conclusion**

As this report's findings and recommendations show, if we are as serious as we should be about promoting effective parental involvement strategies designed to improve educational opportunities and results for all students, then it is time to match our words with action. To successfully address the challenges that we face, policymakers, school leaders, teachers and parents can pursue numerous strategies to make this vision a reality.

Those strategies must be directly responsive to the key challenges identified in this report, but they must do more. To overcome the often-cited impediment to making parental involvement central to school improvement efforts, those strategies must also be associated with clear, meaningful, and measurable benchmarks of accountability. Based on the findings and recommendations in this report, therefore, schools and districts should be able to demonstrate each of the following:

1. Parental involvement is included as a central element in any accountability plan, especially with a focus on school and district improvement goals;
2. Funding and support is provided for efforts to build the capacity of principals, teachers and parents to engage in effective parental involvement efforts designed to provide at-home and at-school support for underachieving students;
3. Staff time is dedicated to facilitating communications and engagement with low income and non-English proficient parents, with clear objectives linked to improving student performance;

4. Multiple, research-based outreach and communication strategies are pursued in order to reach parents regarding student and school performance (and actions they should consider in response); and
5. Community resources are leveraged in order to enhance the ability of schools to support parents and students in need.

It is Appleseed's hope that the recommendations in this report provide an impetus for expanded dialogue and action, focused on what is needed and what works, so that:

- Parents and community members can more meaningfully engage with schools and districts;
- School leaders and teachers who are striving to enhance student learning through multiple strategies can more effectively pursue parental involvement efforts, with positive results;
- Federal, state and local officials responsible for implementing current laws (and for developing new laws) have a better appreciation for the role that parental involvement must play in any effective school reform effort; and
- Education researchers can build on this qualitative study and frame more effective research protocols to guide a next generation of research about what works.

Much of the real work of engaging and empowering parents – all parents – in their children's education lies ahead. Research and experience tell us that the outcome can be powerful indeed.

To download a copy of this report, visit the Appleseed web-site at: [www.appleseednetwork.org](http://www.appleseednetwork.org).

---

---

## **Parent Involvement Related Events, Activities and Resources**

### **Give Kids Good Schools Campaign Continues With a Week of Activities**

Give Kids Good Schools, an initiative of The Public Education Network, is a national campaign to guarantee a quality public education for every child in the nation. Through national activities and online resources, the campaign seeks to provide Americans with the information and tools they need to take action in their communities and improve their public schools. For information, contact the campaign staff at 202.350.5816.

### **National Bullying Prevention Awareness Week Empowers Schools, Parents to End Childhood Harassment**

Teachers, parents, and children nationwide are encouraged to use bullying prevention activities and materials at [www.PACERKidsAgainstBullying.org](http://www.PACERKidsAgainstBullying.org) to help end bullying during National Bullying Prevention Awareness Week October 22 – 28, 2006. This week, dedicated to creating a climate where bullying is not tolerated, is sponsored by PACER Center's National Center for Bullying Prevention and cosponsored by the National Coalition for Parent Involvement in Education, National Education Association, and National PTA.