

# *Supporting Parents as Leaders*

**Stories of Dedication, Determination, and Inspiration**



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# Introduction

The Institute for Responsive Education (IRE) encourages and supports partnerships among schools, families, and communities to enable high quality educational opportunities for all children. Through our research and advocacy work in this area, IRE has found that partnership is an essential component of school reform efforts attempting to improve educational outcomes for all students. In addition to education benefits for children, parents who are involved in their children's educational development report that they are empowered to continue their own schooling and to participate in other civic groups and community organizations.<sup>1</sup> In recognition of the research linking school and family partnership to various forms of student achievement, some school districts are seeking to raise standards through school-based strategies.

A number of these strategies and collaborations place parents in leadership roles. These parents often serve as an important and effective link between schools and families. IRE's work in schools and with community organizations confirms that these new parent leaders have difficult and complicated tasks for which they are not prepared. IRE, through the work of the Parent Leadership Exchange, is addressing these needs by providing a resource network, complete with training, support, information and conferences.

The parent leaders highlighted in this publication have dedicated themselves to the improvement of education for all children. Their stories reflect an ongoing commitment to support parents and quality education for all children. The beginning of their involvement is similar. Minnie M. Dixon captured their sentiments well when she replied "I became involved because I feel like when my child went to school I went to school with her." When problems arose at their children's schools, each took the time to see the problem through and develop a plan of action with the child's teacher. Nancy Meléndez-Girón states that the most important thing for a parent to do is to "be aware of what is going on in the classroom (and) the school."

As you read through this publication, you will recognize the major themes that thread the stories together. The themes are:

- ☆ When parents get information, they get empowered.
- ☆ Parents need to let the teachers know they are there for their children.
- ☆ Parents have skills and abilities that they can offer the school.
- ☆ Schools need to be creative in how they involve parents.
- ☆ Schools can't do it alone; parents can't do it alone.

Each of the parent leaders, Minnie M. Dixon, Wendy Eldredge, Nancy Meléndez-Girón, and Deborah Gray, took the knowledge and experience they gained from being actively involved in their children's education and became confident, empowered women. They all went on to pursue a higher education and professional business career within the field of education. Their stories are uplifting and timely for all parents who want to become parent leaders in their schools and community.

In addition to the stories of the parent leaders, three educators shared their thoughts on how to have successful school, family, and community partnership that improves student outcomes. Claire Crane is the principal of the Ford Elementary School in Lynn, Massachusetts. Ralph Spezio is the principal of the Enrico Fermi Elementary School in Rochester, New York, and Jacqueline Jordan Irvine is a professor of teacher education at Emory University in Atlanta, Georgia. Ralph Spezio, sums it all up with his mantra, "Do not do what is comfortable for adults but what is best for children."

You will find this publication inspirational.

Linda L. Peterson, Project Director  
Parent Leadership Exchange

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<sup>1</sup> Mapp, K. (1999). Making the connection between families and schools: Why and how families are involved in their children's education. Unpublished dissertation, Harvard Graduate School of Education.

# Institute for Responsive Education

## Commitment to School, Family, and Community Partnership

Since its founding in 1973, the Institute for Responsive Education (IRE) has been committed to a more equitable distribution of educational opportunities and achievement for all children across lines of race, ethnicity, language, religion, gender, economic conditions, and geography. We believe that schools, families, and communities have a shared responsibility for the academic and social success of all children and that partnership is the means to exercise these shared responsibilities collaboratively. Partnership requires respectful, trusting, and equitable relationships among diverse participants, a supporting policy framework, allegiance to democratic principles, and a commitment to sustained struggle to overcome challenges. We see partnership as an important component in creating school environments that are responsive to the educational needs of all children.

Many American schools are not realizing their full potential for effectively educating all children to high standards of academic and social development. Differential achievement among children from different racial, ethnic, or socioeconomic backgrounds is a serious national challenge not being adequately addressed in many communities. School, family, community partnership in support of higher standards for all students is one important strategy necessary for achievement equity.

## Our Work

### Research

IRE's goal is to maintain our leadership role as a research-based organization that illuminates the connection between strong school, family, and community partnership and improved learning for all children. IRE conducts an aggressive program of innovative research on the role of partnership among schools, families, and communities, reporting on how partnership practices support teachers, school staff and families in the support of children's learning. We use an action research framework as the basis of our work in schools and communities that utilizes the full participation of parents, students, teachers, and IRE researchers. Action research is a collaborative, outcome oriented process which involves members of the school community in ongoing program assessment and improvement. This is our first choice of methodology because it is empowering to the participants while producing new knowledge for the school community, as well as for policy makers, educational practitioners, researchers, and funding organizations.

### Training and Technical Assistance

We provide training and technical assistance to support efforts in schools and communities aimed at cultivating and maintaining effective school, family, and community partnership. In providing training and assistance, we often work collaboratively with community and education organizations, school systems, and state agencies. A key component of IRE's training methodology is the use of an action research framework to aid schools and communities in organizing a collaborative team. This framework assists in identifying a shared vision of partnership and in developing an action plan to effectively address the challenges present in fulfilling effective partnership among school, family and community.

## **Publications and Dissemination of Information**

We produce reports, books, and how-to guidebooks. Our web site features information about school, family, and community partnership “promising practices,” resources, and IRE publications. We sponsor and co-sponsor conferences and symposia, often in collaboration with other organizations and agencies with shared interests.

### **High School Family Center Research Project**

IRE is currently engaged in the High School Family Center Research Project. The goal of the study is to conduct an environmental scan of existing high school family centers nationwide in order to: 1) document best practices; and 2) identify the role of these centers as a strategy to enhance family involvement in support of students’ learning at the high school level. The project is funded by the Charles Stewart Mott Foundation and the Carnegie Corporation of New York.

This research will present valuable information on the various functions and services provided by high school family centers. The final report and guidebook will inform practitioners and policy makers about the role of school, family, and community partnership as they design whole school reform strategies and formulate policies in support of high school students. The study will be concluded in the fall of 2002.

### **Parent Leadership Exchange Project**

In July of 2000, the Institute for Responsive Education (IRE) launched the Parent Leadership Exchange (PLE) project. IRE’s work in schools and with community organizations shows that parent leaders have difficult and complicated tasks. These parents often serve as an important and effective link between the schools and families. Quite often energetic parents who care deeply about their children’s education, and want to inform others about how to support their children’s learning, fill these roles. They need knowledge and skill to work effectively with complex local school and school district bureaucracies; with teachers, administrators, and school specialists; with families with diverse backgrounds and interests; and with diverse community organizations and agencies.

PLE reaches out to parent leaders in Massachusetts, New Hampshire, and Rhode Island in an effort to foster school, family, and community partnerships and expand networking opportunities while building leadership skills. PLE contributes to meeting the professional development needs of parent leaders, in schools as well as in community organizations, by providing continuing resources, including:

- ☆ Networking opportunities through conferences
- ☆ Newsletters
- ☆ A web site
- ☆ A forum for sharing best practices
- ☆ Training and technical assistance on issues most critical to parent leaders

Workshops include such topics as:

- ☆ Creating a family center
- ☆ Communication barriers and parent outreach
- ☆ How to create a welcoming school atmosphere for families
- ☆ The Joining Process: welcoming, honoring, and connecting with families
- ☆ Designing, implementing, and sustaining an action plan for family involvement

The ultimate purpose of the Parent Leadership Exchange is to increase the capacity of family and community members to improve student outcomes; and, support children to achieve high academic standards with the assistance of well-trained parents leaders and schools’ commitment to school, family, and community partnership.

The project is funded by The Boston Foundation, FleetBoston Financial Foundation, The Nellie Mae Foundation, The Millipore Foundation, and an anonymous donor.

# Interview with Minnie M. Dixon

Director, East Zone Parent Information Center, Boston Public Schools

*Minnie M. Dixon, Director of the East Zone Parent Information Center of the Boston Public Schools, has been involved with education for more than thirty years. Ms. Dixon has a B.A. in Sociology with a minor in Afro-American Studies from UMASS/Boston. As an outreach coordinator for the University of Massachusetts, she was instrumental in developing the first Parent Center in collaboration with District C, now expanded to form the East Zone.*

*In 1999, she received the Community Service Award from the Boston and Vicinity Club. In 1997, she was featured in the People Who Make A Difference In Our Community, a publication by the JFK Library Corp. In 1996, she was a recipient of the Henry Shattuck Public Service Award in Boston. These are but a few of the many awards Minnie has received during her tenure as Director of East Zone Parent Information Center. In addition to her role with the Boston Public Schools, she is a trained urban mediator and an active participant in her community of Dorchester, MA. Minnie is the mother of three, and grandmother of five.*

*Her motto is known to all she has served over the years:*

**Parents Plus Information Equals Success!**



*Minnie M. Dixon, on the left, with Linda Peterson, Parent Leadership Exchange Project Director*

## **How did you get your start with parent involvement?**

I became interested as a parent when I had my first child Sonja thirty-seven years ago. I became involved because I feel like when my child went to school (Boston Public Schools) I went to school with her. I was a single parent living in the middle of OP (Orchard Park Housing Project). I volunteered at first. I painted a bench in the hallway. Then, I learned the Dewey System in the Library. Then, I took a library course at UMASS/Boston. It intrigued me enough that I continued to educate myself.

## **Have your ideas on what parent involvement means changed over the years?**

Well it seems as though, that after thirty-five years of experience with parent involvement, things seem more instant. Parents go on the internet now for information. I have noticed that how parents acquire information has changed.

## **What is your definition of parent involvement?**

Parents are decision-makers. Parents are accountable now to know how to get accurate information. It means helping and supporting schools in all their efforts.

Being visible, being active, being out there, - whatever it takes – all define parent involvement.

## **What is the state of parent involvement now as opposed to when you begin? What are the expectations for parent involvement?**

My focus now is to make the parent center stay focused in a positive way. Expectations in 2001...Where are the parents? Where is the new parent... and why aren't they more visible?

The economy requires parents to work sometimes two or three jobs. They do care. I have seen over 150,000 parents over the years and they all say the same thing. They want the best education for their child. But the economy causes some parents not to be as active or involved as much as they would like to be. It is all about money. They have to make money.

## **Why do you think is it important to educate parents on becoming involved?**

Good parent involvement can produce great success stories. I do believe the premise that parents are the first educators of their children. They **are** the first educators. I believe that.

Parents need to have their children ready to learn. And, then, follow them to school. See what they are doing in the classrooms.

All children learn differently and parents need to be involved. They should learn the curriculum, learn the style of their child's teacher. Although there are new expectations with MCAS, teachers do teach differently and parents need to see what is going on the classrooms for themselves.

Then, by supporting the schools they make it stronger. It is important for parents to have leadership roles, such as a role on the school council. Good parent involvement produces good student outcomes.

### **Do you think there is still much resistance to parent involvement by administrators and teachers?**

Your product is measured by your test results. Resistance to parent involvement should not be an issue anymore in any school. Parents should be welcome. Teachers and principals should look for parents to help. Yet, there is still some resistance. How far can you trust the parent to go, and does the school see parent involvement as positive or negative? This resistance can be a barrier. Resistance is present when there is no trust and with the unknown. Administrators need to look at the strength of parents as a group and the fear parents, as well as teachers, have towards each other, and turn it into a positive thing.

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***“Parents plus information equals success” (is my life)!***

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### **What has worked best for you in your involvement with schools over the years? Do you have a project that really worked for the average parent?**

“Parents plus information equals success” is my life. I have lived it. I believe in trust, in being involved and if I say it today I am going to say it again tomorrow.

Believe it or not, when I first started with parent involvement I worked with a parent at a small kitchen table. Going into the home is crucial, having a cup of coffee is important.

Giving information to parents through the little program Leadership Academy for Parents - the program that Linda Peterson started in the East Zone - was one of our jewels. I really enjoyed it. It had to be maintained small. It was for parents who wanted the information and wanted a smaller atmosphere. It was a joyful program.

The concept for parent centers worked well. When we first started it during the early 1980's we were in the hallway. We thought it would be a small program, also. This one little program through UMASS/Boston became citywide. I am very proud of the fact that I was involved with parent information centers. The team I was part of made it work and we have been recognized across the city as well as the state for it. And you have to carry on.

# Interview with Wendy Eldredge

Executive Director, Family Partnerships, Ayer, MA.

*Wendy Eldredge is responsible for writing and administering educational grants for the town of Ayer. She has most recently secured funding for an expanded Family Resource Center in the Ayer Public Schools. The grand total of awards for FY 2001 is \$427,000.00.*

*Late in 1998, she was named executive director of a Massachusetts Family Network site in Ayer, called "Family Partnerships". The Partnership's Family Resource Center serves as the hub for resources and referrals for three communities (including Ayer). The Family Resource Center, located within the Family Partnership Center, hosts daily moderated playgroups, teen parent outreach, a home visitation program, parent support and training as well as a library filled with videos, tapes, books, and periodicals on issues of interest to families.*

*The experience in her community as play group founder, children's fair organizer, U.S. citizenship instructor and food pantry volunteer has allowed her to have unique insight into the needs of Ayer's families. Wendy also sits on several advisory panels for the Massachusetts Department of Education. She is the Chairperson of the Ayer Early Childhood Advisory Council which spearheads many programs in the community for young families. She is married to a life-long resident of Ayer and is the mother of two daughters.*



## How did you get your start with parent involvement?

Let me tell a little background first. I went through two very bad pregnancies. Both my daughters were premature and one of the risk factors after delivering a preemie is parent isolation. Early intervention has a list of all these risk factors. I didn't know anybody in town. My husband was from here but I was from a tiny town far from here. I didn't know what to do. So I started a couple of neighborhood playgroups. I was getting to know people. When I was pregnant with my second child, I went into labor at twenty-two weeks. My friends that I met through the playgroup sat down at my kitchen table and decided who was going to take Molly, who was going to cook, and who was going to wash my hair. So I didn't have to go to the hospital. Because of that I have Sara. I really learned first hand what community involvement and family means. My mother and mother-in-law worked and helped when they could. I wasn't working and my husband was working full time. We didn't have money to hire help. At the time the doctors were saying to deliver the pregnancy and call it a late miscarriage. Now I have walking talking evidence of how valuable support can be for families.

Not long after that Molly started pre-school. The school wanted a book mom. So I tried to volunteer

to be the book mom. The director of the preschool said the position was filled and the principal said, "I will call you the next time I need a volunteer." The principal (who recently passed away at a young age) got a grant, a mysterious grant that nobody knew what it was all about. It was called the Community Partnership for Children and was designed to help give scholarships to working families, and do some training and quality enhancement to preschools, both public and private, in town. The principal needed someone to do marketing, outreach and public relations for the school and the program throughout the local preschools. They also wanted a neighborhood council to see how the money was spent. The grant was for \$18,000. I was called and asked to be on the council. At the first meeting they said they needed someone to do the marketing work and the program. I have a BA from Clark and worked in marketing for Clark before I had the babies. This looked like a perfect thing. It was just for a few hours a month and I could bring the baby. My kids and family come first. It has never been a problem - it worked out great. It went from \$18,000 in 1995 to \$162,000 this year. That is our program for three and four year old children.

I did that for two or three years then saw there was nothing for babies. I talked with the principal about a grant called Massachusetts Family Network. We got the grant the second time we tried. It was for \$150,000 for ages birth to three years old.

Now I hire staff to run the playgroups at the Family Center at the school. We now have a very comprehensive program for birth to age five. I had no background in this and no education and thought, I want to try this. Upper management said go for it - try it. It has worked out great and we help a lot of families. We have a site in the school and at a church in the town of Shirley. Eighteen thousand is maybe the population of the two towns. We have a home visitor program for about twenty families. We are doing all right.

### **Is family involvement changing?**

The demographics are changing. I think the rents are going up. They went up over 125% in the last five years. Some families are moving to Fitchburg, Lowell and a few are homeless. We have a homeless women's shelter in Devens.

Because of the demographic switch there is more family involvement now plus we have given them a way to be involved. Our mission statement is to support a parent in any way we can - to help them to be the child's first and best teacher. And that's it. If they need to pay the electric bill, if they need help breast feeding, if they need a yoga class. On any given day we can get a call about "my husband is beating me up what do I do", to "where do I take my child to dinner"; it totally runs the gamut. It's a very funny demographic. We can have the very low and high end. But what we try to do is have an environment where everyone is welcome.

We had a Muslim family come in a few weeks ago and the woman said she did not know if she should come. When I asked why and she said she was a Muslim. I said of any place that she could come to, it was here. Everyone is safe here. The women in the group put their arms around her and told her not to worry.

### **What, if any, are the weaknesses of your program?**

We are not good at finding people; the town clerk does not give us the list of new babies born. But we try to find new babies, and we give them a gift worth about \$120.00. It is one of our biggest challenges. How do you get families involved if you can't find them? At one time we were giving a free book or a \$5 book gift certificate or an entry into a free drawing for referrals of new families.

### **Can you tell me a little about your staff and your relationship with the school?**

We have a very high level of qualifications for our staff. Our teacher has a masters level education. We have very dedicated people to this cause that has become bigger than any of us. We have 450 families on our mailing list children from birth to age four. The school is our landlord and the superintendent, Dr. Kevin O'Malley, is my boss, as well as the biggest supporter of the family/parent programs. My old principal used to do all the administrative tasks such as hiring. Now I do it. She used to run interference with the School Committee and Department. So the superintendent said "just report to me and we will cut out the middle-man". He trusts that we have good judgement. Our School Committee has three members who have children that fall in to our age groups. They have all used our services over time. In Shirley, we have a little different relationship. We use a local church but the school gives us referrals and it has worked out pretty well.

We pay rent to the school (\$12,000 a year) and (\$1,200) to the church in Shirley, which we have two mornings a week. They believe in the mission. We sell it in a way that they buy in.



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**Our mission is to support a parent in any way we can – to help them to be the child’s first and best teacher.**

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**What have been your most successful or fun workshops that you have given?**

Our playgroups are huge. Some groups I used to do. Kim runs a group, but now I have a woman from the community who has been wonderful. I had a teacher with a masters degree who was teaching this and it just didn’t work out with the parents. Too much structure. It just didn’t work out – she had too much curriculum. But the other woman was doing child care for us at the time, I asked if she would be willing to try the groups. She was a waitress with two young children. I believe that you, as staff, should be able to bring the kids so we can practice what we preach. If you can model appropriate interaction and behaviors with your child that is the strongest recommendation. Since she has started she has gone back to school to become a certified pre-school teacher. She is terrific. I am so proud of her.

The development of the leadership of the playgroups is a great success story. Everyone is doing what they are supposed to be doing and doing a very fine job. And the parents are coming. They get down on their hands and knees and play with their kids. That may not happen at their house but it happens here. Some parents come every single day. Isolation can be a huge risk factor for success. Because of the prices of rents, some are living in small apartments and have no space to play with the kids. Now the children have a place to come and learn and do.

**What do you do for working parents?**

We have evening and weekend groups. We have Dad and Me Craft Nights, Mom and Me Craft Nights, Mom and No Kids Crafts Nights, Scrap Book Night, and a Positive Parenting Series. We hire a baby sitter for events – we offer a babysitting class for high school students. All of these things are partnerships that we have built up over time.

I have given a parenting series on discipline. I couldn’t find anyone to do it. I had read the book, *One, Two, Three, Magic* when my two were little and it saved my family. So I taught the class based

on the book. I am doing it at all the pre-schools this year.

We have a program for fathers, a pre-release program at MCA Shirley. (Prisoners could not have been incarcerated for domestic or child abuse.) The social worker at the prison and a few others gave a staff member a list of eight topics and she had to create a curriculum for these fathers so they could re-commit to their children. At the end of the eight-week program they were allowed to have a party with their families. During the course they had written a letter to their children, telling them daddy is in prison, I did a bad thing, it is not your fault, not mommy’s fault, but I am getting ready to come out and I want to be there for you and mommy. She helped them write these letters and all but two families came. They took pictures and had crafts. They had a playgroup like we do at the school. Even if things don’t work out at least the kids can look back and say they had a great time with their dad for one night. That’s huge. They are still kids, they are still dads and moms who have needs. They may not even live in Massachusetts. We were able to help hook up families with some other towns services. There are now 80 on the waiting list.

Also, once a month she is going to go to the prison and send the children a book and have the dads read the book on a tape for them. I would to see this become a model and be taken on the road. I am really proud of what she has done.

Our Parent-Child Home Program has a beautiful curriculum - two half-hours per week and the home visitors show the parents how to play with the child. They get 30 toys/books over two years. The Boston Globe mentioned us a few years ago. Kindergarten teachers can tell the difference between a one-book kid and a one thousand-books kids. My goal is to have every kid be at least a fifty-book kid.

**What are your next steps?**

So after all this has happened I have gone back to school to get a masters in education at Fitchburg State.

# Interview with Deborah Gray

## Project Manager, Women's Institute

*Deborah is the parent of five and the grandparent of two children. She is a resident of Dorchester and attends the UMASS/Boston Human Services Graduate Program. She and her family have persevered through a series of life experiences that she draws upon to educate, advocate, and encourage others to move forward in their lives. Homelessness, welfare reform, and single parenting led her to reach out to other parents to educate and support one another for their children. She participated in the Boston Public Schools' East Zone Parent Leadership Academy. She was an AmeriCorps ACT member for two years developing parent involvement programs for after-school providers with Parents United for Child Care (PUCC). Deborah has been actively working on community issues such as parent involvement, family support, education reform, health care and child care for several years. She facilitates parenting skills workshops and community and parent leadership development training for several community action groups. She currently works for the Women's Institute for Housing and Economic Development and sits on the Board of Directors at PUCC. Deborah's commitment and dedication to family issues is expressed through her continuous energy and activism in the community.*



### **How did you get your start with parent involvement?**

I became interested because of my own children and the issues I was going through with them at school. My four youngest were born in Atlanta and I was a working parent. I started them off in family childcare because I felt that I did not want them placed with a whole lot of children. I wanted them in a "homey-type" atmosphere. That didn't work out so well because there were no regulations or certification restrictions for family care. Now, I can't say that I felt good about all the centers I tried either. Most of the time I felt that more educational things could have been done. When they started going to school I went with them. When we moved back to Boston, I knew I would have to be very involved and I wanted school to be a positive experience for my family. I still go to school the first day. I like to meet their teachers and check out their classroom. I like to get to know the teachers so they can know me and feel free to contact me. I want them to know that I am there for my child. It has been a juggling act – it's difficult trying to work and be available for your children at the same time. I became an AmeriCorps ACT volunteer at PUCC so I could be available for my kids during the day while I attended college at night. My specialty was working with after school programs on parent involvement. I developed a workshop and started a guide to improve parent involvement in programs. I came at it from my own needs and once I saw the importance of parents being involved and getting to know each other and their children's teachers, I wanted to give back to help other parents. I knew the connection between the home and school was important so that became my key interest – working with the teachers and the parents.

### **Has your understanding of parent involvement changed over the years?**

Yes, it has definitely changed. I had experience running a child care center before I began parenting my younger children. At first I thought it meant just coming to spend time in the classroom. How can you do that when you are working? I thought it meant getting to know the teacher by sending cookies for the holidays and things like that at first. I felt like teachers know what to do in school, my job was to get them there. Then my children's individual needs started to stand out, and I knew it had to be more than that. I have one child who has behavior issues. I didn't want the teachers to just call me when she was acting out. I wanted them to know that I am interested in her well-being and that the two of us would have to keep our communication lines open and flowing. I needed to know when she did good things in school also. I wanted them to know what was happening at home which might upset her at school and vice versa. So as time went on I began to look at parent involvement differently. It has to integrate individual family needs with the schools' needs.

### **If parents can't come to the school, then they can support the school in other ways:**

- ☆ One way could be reviewing school rules with their child, and
- ☆ Reviewing teacher expectations with the child on how to behave in school, or
- ☆ Helping them with their homework and contacting the teacher if they don't understand the homework or the grade the child received.

Keeping the lines of communication open – knowing that if you call the teacher, you know she will get the message and if she calls you that you will call her back. It is more than PTA meetings. Parents have so many skills and abilities that they can offer the school in more creative and different ways.

I remember when my children were in elementary school we started a classroom phone tree – I got to meet other parents and when my child talked about children and things that they did in the classroom I knew who they were talking about. When the class had activities some of us parents would plan to go together and have a chance to sit together and talk. It's really good for children to see their parents getting to know other parents and working together. Parent involvement has changed from “only come out when we need you to help us raise money” to other creative ways to be involved in school and in the child's education. Parents can have a variety of roles in the school: classroom help, reading and tutoring, serve on committees and boards, advocates and policy makers. I did a lot of work around helping schools think of creative ways to bring parents in so they wouldn't feel so intimidated with the school. Some times parents may have issues with school from when they had not such a good experience themselves. And now they are expected to come to the school and find out about their child. There are ways to reach out to parents to make them feel comfortable.

### **What is your definition of parent involvement?**

Parents concerned and contributing in all aspects of their child's life. I don't think teachers want all the parents of 25 or 30 children coming up to the classroom. Instead, if they can make a connection with parents they can find ways to help get them involved. I let the teachers know I am available if they need me but sometimes I think some teachers get a little intimidated by strong parents. One thing that is always interesting is getting parents, teachers, and providers together to talk about their ideas on parent involvement. As a group facilitator, I always see a wide range of ideas. At some school open house events you don't usually see many teachers. To me, if you want to bridge the gap to create a sense of “welcome-ness” to the school, then you have take that extra time and actually *be there*. Let the parents see you interacting with the children and other parents because that shows that

you are a person who really likes what you are doing. Then the parents are much more likely to get involved.

### **What is the state of parent involvement today?**

Parent involvement is in a much better place. People are talking about it and working on making it happen. Many schools are really trying to reach out more than five or ten years ago. Most schools have some kind of committee or think tank that is working on parent involvement and trying to bring parents into the school. I like it when schools have parent liaison opportunities – parents reaching out to other parents. Parents available where, if you have a problem, they can kind of help you and the school get together to work out the issue.

Some schools do still have some resistance. You really have to think about how you are going to open the doors for parents and let them in - in a way that is not intrusive to the goals of the school also. Schools say, “we want parent input,” but when a parent says, “I don't think the way you are teaching is right” – well, how do you find the middle place? How do you help the schools and the parents reach goals that have been set for the children?

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### ***There has to be some strategic thinking around what does parent involvement really mean for our school, our parents, and our children; and how do we get to where we really want to be?***

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As long as people keep children in the focus - the home and school working together can make sure the child gets what he needs - things can work out very well by being sensitive on both sides, keeping open dialog and getting to know the families you are working with. The first step is to engage parents; get them to participate, then encourage involvement in an event or activity; and then don't forget to keep them involved by helping develop leadership skills; offering parent education sessions that they expressed interest in attending.

I'd like to reiterate that schools need a good *parent action plan*. This month we are going to do this or that and then build on it – have a calendar so parents can see the benefits of their child going to this school. This helps parents feel welcome and invested in the school.

# Interview with Nancy Meléndez-Girón

## Parent Workshop Presenter

*Nancy Meléndez-Girón has most recently held the position of the Parents Institute Coordinator for the Boston-based Latino Parents Association, Inc. Her skills and commitment to community involvement takes her beyond her professional responsibilities. She has been involved with ACORN, The Chelsea Commission on Hispanic Affairs, Latino Family Child Care Providers, and as a teacher and coordinator of an adult learners education program at the Congregation Lion of Juda in Boston. Nancy, a native of Honduras, taught elementary and middle school before coming to the United States. Her experiences in Honduras taught her the value of education. Her experiences as a limited-English speaking parent of two children in the United States public school system taught her determination. Her interview clearly shows her growth from an accepting parent to a strong advocate for her children and for parents new to this country. Nancy is truly an exceptional parent leader.*



## How did you get your start with parent involvement?

Two weeks after I came to this country, I began taking English classes at the Salvation Army. I had a ten month old daughter and brought her with me. The program taught us to read to children and it was here that I really learned how important it is to read to children. I began to read to my daughter and I really started doing it when my daughter was 10 months old. Shortly after, I got my family childcare provider license. I got here in January and by September I started to work. I worked as a family child care provider for eight years.

My children had a bad experience at the school and I didn't know what to do, I didn't really know English and didn't know how to handle it. I didn't have the courage to go to the school and complain to the teacher, why did you do this to my daughter. It was very frustrating. Now I understand how parents feel - people who don't speak English.

When my second child, my son, started the first grade I had a bad feeling that something wrong was happening to him at school. So I talked to him at first. I told him "tell me what you do at school, what you do first, second. "For writing they take me out of the classroom for a small group" – "What do you do?" – "The teachers help me read or write." I didn't know my son was in that small group. It stunned me because I didn't know he was behind. I really got mad. I spoke with my husband and with a friend who is a principal and who told me what we should do. He told us not to be afraid. "This is your right." He convinced us that we should have a written statement about my son's level and what they are going to do to help him.

My husband and I went to the school and spoke with the principal, who spoke Spanish, which helped us a lot. I confronted his teacher in English – and bad English – I remember that she kept telling me he is too young. I said I know he is too young but the system accepted him. He wasn't six years old yet. I said, "What is your plan? I want to get involved in my son's education. He is at this level, tell me what I should do. You and me should write a plan about what we are going to do to bring him up to this level." The other teachers agreed, and things really changed. I paid more attention to him and why he was not learning. My son is really very smart – he learned Spanish through a cassette. I got more involved in his education and taught him at home. He was doing excellent at home. I could not understand why he was not learning at school. His teacher showed me his work, and I said, "This cannot be." She changed her methodology and he was able to go to second grade. She needed to know his learning style. Because a mom got involved the teacher did a double check on what she was doing and it made a difference.

My son wasn't challenged in the second grade. He was not getting what he really needed. By the last quarter I was crying; he was not improving. I talked with the principal again, I said I cannot be in the school showing the teacher how to teach my son. I want you to give me a good teacher for my son for the third grade. He said my son was a good candidate for the two-way Spanish program. He applied and was accepted. I was concerned, but I wasn't sure how much he knew Spanish to be ready. He was doing wonderful. That teacher had a lot of experience, she knew Latino culture. She had a lot of ability. He is now on the honor roll in

the fourth grade. I don't have to tell him to do homework and he talks good things about his teachers.

## **Have your ideas about what parent involvement means changed over the years?**

Of course, first of all I think that we have to have courage to be involved; we need someone to help us how the system works; what we should do at home and in the community. We need mentors. Without that parents won't be involved.

## **What is your definition of parent involvement?**

- ☆ Be aware of what is going on in the classroom, the school
- ☆ Be active in parent groups and councils
- ☆ Participate in the community
- ☆ Be involved with other parents in the community
- ☆ Read, watch the news
- ☆ Check the back pack of your children
- ☆ Be sure they are rested enough when going to school
- ☆ Give hugs and kisses for them
- ☆ Support them academically and emotionally
- ☆ Communicate with the teachers and principal
- ☆ Go to the concerts
- ☆ Meet classmates of the children

*It sounds so simple but it is so hard to do it – but we must!*

## **What changes, if any, have you seen in parent involvement over the years?**

Parent involvement has improved. I remember when my daughter started – she is in 7<sup>th</sup> grade now – I didn't feel welcomed to the school. Teachers were so serious. They were just professional. I can see teachers now – we are a team. Their attitude is more welcoming to parents. Teachers are more interested in knowing our culture and other cultures, not just Latino. Parents are not as afraid as five or ten years ago. There are more organizations helping us get involved. There is more in the newspapers or on TV telling parents to get involved and to get a higher education.

## **Why do we need parent leaders today?**

Some schools don't know how to do parent involvement. They don't have the resources they only know the text books. Principals are overwhelmed. Teachers are leaving. There is too

much instability between teacher and administrators. Parent involvement can make a difference. Schools need to open a position to coordinate all the parent efforts. The teachers can't - it is too much. We have to be honest, they have a lot of work. Many children have problems in the classrooms and the teachers are tired. With the right resources more parents will be comfortable to go to school and help. They need to know how to do it.

## **Tell me about what you have been doing recently to promote parent leaders and parent involvement?**

I use a curriculum that helps parents – it is a seven-week class that promotes commitment and discipline among parents. I do a lot of small group work. Parents share their experiences. We use a video in Spanish. I explain to them what are their rights, what the system should have for them, and how they can overcome the barrier of language and not to be afraid to go to school. We talk about self-esteem – most of the time we don't move on is because we have so low self-esteem. And when they find themselves and reflect on themselves and start to work on that, it is reflected on their children. I have the program with the children here – because it is very important to be with the parents. It promotes more family union. We talk about communication with children. You never stop learning communication. We talk about practical ideas to start at home. We try to find solutions together with the parents.

## **Any last thoughts?**

*My experience is that when parents get information, they get empowered.* The "how" to get involved is the key. Many parents don't get involved because they just don't know how. Parents need practical ways, not theory. In my own job it is so good to see the faces of the parents from the first class to the last class. When they are like, "Ah ha! Let me see what you are going to teach me. Let me see if this is going to be work for me, and this two-year old is driving me crazy!" Attitudes change. There are a lot of activities. We are productive. When we are in the last class and make reflections and what changes they have made because of the curriculum at home, school, and in the community. We discuss what we need to do at home, school and community – they sit down and write down their own action plan on what we have discussed. They are happier, relaxed. They always say the class should be longer. It is nice to hear the parents say the children are happier at home.

# Interview with Dr. Claire Crane

Principal, Robert L. Ford Elementary School, Lynn, Massachusetts

*Dr. Crane, principal of the Ford Elementary School since 1989, has created a nationally recognized "Village School" which welcomes entire families to come together in keeping with the "family-community-school- partnership concept." Problem solving, leadership, and communication skills are some of the qualities developed from her experience as an administrator and teacher in the development of the "Family of Learners" in the Village. The Ford School, in collaboration with Salem State College, North Shore Community College, and the Lynn Family Support Coalition, was the grand prize runner up for Effective School and Community Leadership of the MetLife Foundation 2001 Teacher-Parent Engagement Through Partnerships Award.*

*Dr. Crane's accomplishments are extensive and well-deserved. Among her awards are Educator of the Year – Salem State College 1997, Outstanding Citizen of the Year – MA Department of Mental Health 1996, and a visit by Hillary Clinton in recognition of the Village School 1996. Through programs initiated by Dr. Crane, the Ford school offers parents a myriad of classes and professional opportunities, including, ESL, GED, and citizenship classes. Student outcomes have progressed dramatically under her tenure as principal.*

## **How did you get interested in parent involvement?**

In 1989, the Ford School was the worst school in the city. It was a school in chaos. It had a long history of being a troubled school. A school committee person said to me when my appointment was recommended, "Are you sure you will be able to handle it? I think they need a man, a big six-foot football player." I said I could handle it.

I was always involved with parents, beginning as a school adjustment counselor. I was involved with projects such as Project COPE – a drug and alcohol program. I was certified as a social worker where I worked with families. There was a teacher where I worked who started a PTA. As a guidance counselor there were five of us who got new books for the parents. I have always had a history of working with parents.

## **How have your ideas about parent involvement changed over the years?**

It has not only changed but it has broadened. When I first came to school I was going to take the parents and fix them up, move them out of the neighborhood, so they could make a new life. Now the tables have turned. I have found out that the parents here want to stay and I have realized that fixing them up and out is not what they want. With parent involvement you go through layers. At first they wanted a GED and now we are working on college degrees. Involvement has broadened. I have always believed in parent involvement, that it changes student achievement. I have always believed that.



## **What is your role as principal to increase parent involvement?**

There is so much pressure with accountability with student achievement. Parent involvement does affect student achievement. When these parents have had bad experiences with school, and their children come home after school with negative experiences, they agree. When they become a part of school the children's attitude changes and becomes positive like the parent's. Therefore, we do GED, college courses, ESL, advanced ESL, and citizenship classes. One hundred and fifty people attend night school here. There is night care, some of the teachers and parents baby-sit for the parents. About sixteen parents are getting their college degree, the custodian is taking it, the secretary is involved; it is a family here - everyone is invited to participate. The cost is free through a grant.

## What success can you point to because of parent involvement?

We have all day kindergarten and are now K-8. The parents have done battles with the administration on behalf of their kids. They have really made gains for their children.

As far as the kids themselves, their achievement scores, this whole district is a non-achieving district. We are about eighth or ninth out of about eighteen. But each year we go up. We have gone up six points and nine points in the last few years. The scores are going up but we do have a long way to go. I see many of the kids graduate from honors from high school and then go on to college. Some who have graduated have come back to visit. They have left here with a good foundation. We are very proud of that. When I first came here college was not in the vocabulary of parents, but we now do a program with Salem State. For the last four or five years, I have sent 120 kids from grades three through six (sixty a semester) to Salem State. They are in three classes - computers, arts and crafts, and health and fitness. They have seen the college scene and it has opened doors for them.

We have a parent room that used to be busy during the day but now with welfare reform parents come at night and they go to classes here. Some now have their Associates Degree and are going on. Our teachers aide course helps parents here. We are seen as good for employers - they drop off flyers. We have job postings.

## What are the parents working on now?

We are working on a grant with parents. It is a grant with the Department of Education to create a community intervention team, a referral system for parents. The parents will be able to come to our team and get resources so they don't have to wait so long for assistance. We have about eight agencies to work with.



## Do you have any parent success stories that you would like to share?

There are many, here are a few:

- ☆ I have seen parents go from isolation in an abusive relationship to the business world.
- ☆ Mother and grandmother got their GED, and are now finishing another degree.
- ☆ Mother and two daughters each got a GED.
- ☆ One parent told me he was able to "Get the big job for more money!" after ESL classes at the school.
- ☆ One parent came over from Vietnam, entered ESL, and now works in the Lynn Parent Center.

## Do you have any suggestions for principals on how to create a successful school?

Develop a vision and always stay focused on your vision. Staff, parents, and community are needed to develop the vision for the school. Systems can overburden principals, superintendents can come and go and come in with all kinds of different things. But keep focused on your vision. You can lose the vision with the changes in administration.

Families come first. Listen! Do surveys for school climate, of parents, of the community. You have to be a good listener. Network in the community, build alliances, have an open door policy – now like a revolving door.

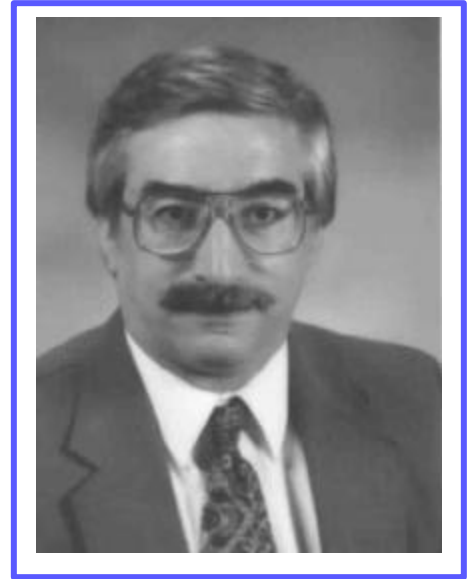
Because of those community partnerships I am able to get parents jobs, because of those community partnerships I am able to get programs. For example, summer school funding was cut one year. I asked local businesses, "Will you sponsor a teacher?" One business said, "I will sponsor three teachers." If the administration stopped funding tomorrow, I know I can get funding.

Being a principal is the best job in the world. A friend of mine told me that many years ago because you can create with education reform. You can do a lot of things with kids and when you accomplish them it is very satisfying. I have been an assistant superintendent but what I found was that I was coming here having breakfast with the kids and coming back having lunch with the kids. I missed the direct contact with the kids. There is a difference with doing whole systems things take longer here you see results within a year.

# Interview with Ralph Spezio

Principal, Enrico Fermi Elementary School, Rochester, New York

*Ralph Spezio is the principal of the Enrico Fermi Elementary School #17 in Rochester, New York. The school, which enrolls 800 students, is located in one of the poorer sections of the city. Under the leadership of Principal Spezio, it has become one of the shining stars of the Rochester School District. The tests scores have soared, the attendance is high, and the parents and community are true partners. For those of us who search the Internet for information about schools, there is no lack of articles about the Enrico Fermi Elementary School. Some of the articles include: Spezio's diligent work in trying to get lead removed from houses in his school's neighborhood – a number his students have a higher lead level than is considered safe by the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention; the building of the Community Health and Family Center on school grounds for students and the community – a first in New York State and perhaps the country; the creation of a Montessori Pre-school Program in the school – the only public school in the Rochester area with a Montessori program and; an announcement that Rosie O'Donnell with the Charming Shoppes of New York City were donating winter coats, hats and gloves to every student in the school. Ralph Spezio is a champion of children!*



## **The following are Principal Spezio's suggestions for principals who want to create successful school, family, and community partnerships:**

### **Define the culture of your school. It should be:**

1. A beacon for the community not a fortress on the hill.
2. The center of an urban village.

### **Set the vision for your school. How:**

1. Do it collaboratively.
2. Seize autonomy from the central office.
3. Be tenacious.
4. Live it, breathe it.
5. Make partnerships and find grants.
6. Have an open shop, change staff.

### **Work with a sense of urgency. How:**

1. Know where your destination is.
2. Keep it on the front burner.
3. Demonstrate commitment. Fire non-workers.
4. Build capacity within your staff.

### **Don't dwell on where you are. Do:**

1. Recognize where you are.
2. Decide where you want to be.
3. Develop strategies to get you there.

### **The magic formula is:**

1. Identify the problem.
2. Use reliable data to confirm your needs.
3. Use the data to drive the resources into your building.
4. Tie it all to student achievement.

### **Know your parents. How:**

1. Go to their homes.
2. Tell them that together you can partner to help their children.
3. No hiding. Have your desk near the entrance. Face your desk towards the parents. No fancy appointments. Don't be too busy for parents.

### **You are the “system”. Parents from poverty don't know how to access the system.**

1. You are the system – show them how to get access.
2. Train the parents on the political system – bring in activists as trainers on how to engage the system.
3. Create leaders.

### **Staff**

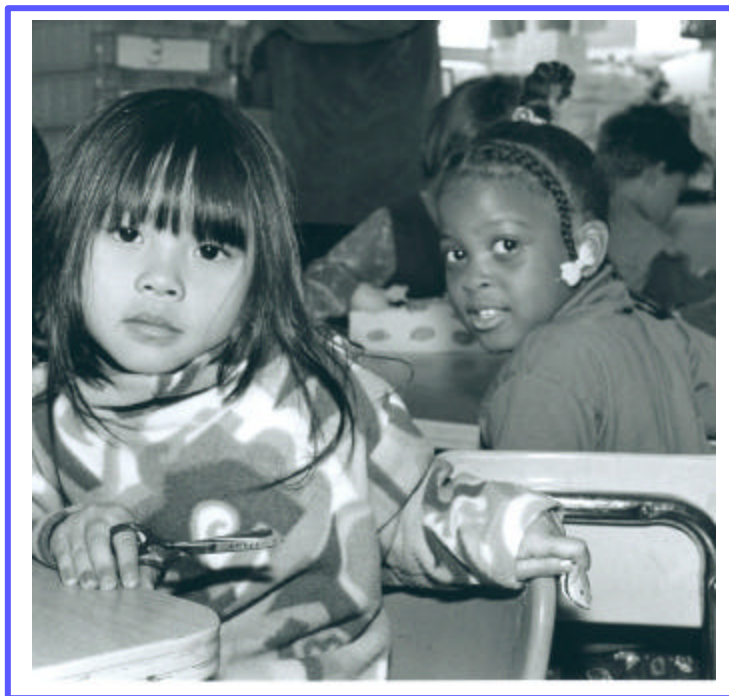
1. Tell them, you are surrounded with heroes and champions for children.
2. Set the standard.
3. Children of poverty live in survivor mode. Have teachers be the emotional bond that will get the children to build trust in teachers so they can come to school ready to learn and feel safe.
4. Have your staff be full partners – staff delivers the in-service.
5. Build in an in-school intervention team (only 30 of 132 students referred to the in-house intervention team went on to have special education referrals).

### **Student Achievement**

1. Allow data driven student achievement.
2. Build in year-long rigorous assessments.
3. Have no surprises in May.

### **Final Thoughts:**

- ★ **Monitor your growth; monitor your destination.**
- ★ **Communicate that together we are strong.**
- ★ **Live it, taste it, breathe it.**
- ★ **Do not do what is comfortable for adults but what is best for children.**
- ★ **Everyone wants to help education and the principal creates the vehicles for them.**



# Interview with Jacqueline Jordan Irvine

**Candler Professor of Urban Education  
Emory University, Atlanta, Georgia**

*Interviewed by Carol Sills Strickland, Institute for Responsive Education*

*During the month of May 2001, Dr. Irvine was the Kellogg Visiting Professor of Education at Northeastern University. She is the founder and director of the Center for Urban Learning/Teaching and Urban Research in Education and Schools (CULTURES), recognized as a model of best practice in teacher professional development by the US Department of Education. Her research interests are the cultural context of teaching and learning and professional development of urban teachers.*



## **What have you found, if anything, in your work about the role of parents and community in improving students' achievement in school?**

Actually I am finishing up a project where I am interviewing these teachers who were nominated by a principal as exemplar teachers in these African American schools and the teachers in turn nominated the parents who they thought were supportive and good models of parents. So what we're going to do is triangulate the three sources. Vanessa [Siddle Walker] is doing the parent piece and I did the teacher piece, but generally what we are coming up [with] about parent involvement – and I'm talking mostly about African American, so don't take it out of the cultural context [to] Hispanic or other groups because I don't know it to be the case – is that...generally schools think about parent involvement as parent participation. They're two very different things. Parent participation is what schools want. That means is that what they want are school-orchestrated events, orchestrated and planned events in schools in which school people define what it is they want parents to do. And they want parents to do things on their turf like come to PTA meetings and listen to them talk, come and be chaperones on trips, and recently in the reform movement, these school people have started to ask parents, African American parents and other parents of color to become involved in decision-making, governance issues, like helping to select the principal or serving on a board that decides the curriculum. School involvement, however, has a different connotation. It's wider and it's broader. Involvement can be a range of things that the parent does to support their kid's school success.

And involvement varies by the parent's ability to be involved. So when I talk to teachers I say that there are some parents, single parents, low-income parents – their involvement in their child's education could be providing a half of a kitchen table, some pencils and a notebook and saying, "Do your homework." Which is as much as some of them can do, for various reasons such as, from their own problems that they're having with unemployment, crime, drugs, apathy, to physically heal, to having three jobs, et cetera. But when school people ask parents for participation, they want parents to monitor their children's work. They want them to check the children's homework. Well, that's out of the realm of possibility for most poor, by the way that's true for most parents once their kids gets through middle school, for example doing the algebra. So anything less than their definition of "participation" gets translated by school people in statements like, "Parents don't care. The parents aren't interested. The parents won't come." And so Vanessa and I have been thinking about this a lot and using her expertise on history of African American parent involvement, have come up with a different kind of spin on it which is this: Historically, African Americans have held teachers in very high esteem. They were the pillar of the community. They were people who people trusted their children with and there's a particular southern ritual where parents would, on the first day of school, dress the child up for the first day of school. And they would put on their little new socks, new bag, new whatever, and they would take their child to school the first day. And symbolically it meant that I'm

turning my child over to you to teach and to care for. This is like pre-Brown. You, I know you. I know you will do nothing, you won't do anything that will interfere with my child's success.

And you will take care of my child. And here. (She motions as if handing something over). Now you call me if my child is not behaving and I will, quote "get on em." If you need something like fundraising – all black schools used to do fundraising, fried fish, raffle tickets, all of those things were part of the ethos of the black community. Band uniforms? You call on the community. They gon' have a raffle. We gon' get new band [uniforms]. The parents saw themselves as the support system outside of the school that did whatever it is teachers asked them to do. Now take that template and impose it on now, what school people are saying and you can see that there's this sort of cultural mismatch. A lot of poor African American parents don't see themselves sitting on a committee deciding on what curriculum, what textbooks, what principal is the best principal. And many of them when they come to these meetings, either – they tell me – they're patronized, people really don't want to know what they want, but they like the idea of them sitting on these boards, but they don't take them seriously about what they say. The language is often alienating and they use all kind of jargon and they don't know what the hell that they're talking about. But I also found out several years ago in my center when I talked to Hispanic community people is they have the same idea about teachers. They do the first day of school thing too – same idea: Here's my child. You're professional, you know what to do, but I just won't be up in here, I won't be running up in here volunteering to do this and chaperoning, because I don't see that as my role. So I think that in a sense we need to define what parent involvement is. We need to understand the historical context of family involvement for different cultural groups and then somewhere the school and people in the community need to meet on some common ground to decide what is an effective parent involvement.

Now the other thing you asked me is what is the relationship between all of this and achievement. Now when you look at the literature it's very mixed. There's some literature that's very strong that said that parent involvement directly translates into high student achievement. But there are all other kinds of variables that are uncontrolled for in the research, like did you control for social class. There's also the halo effect. If I as a parent am up in the school, volunteering, chaperoning, on the advisory committee, the teachers are likely to be more positive about my child than if I hadn't come. Now white parents have picked on this idea. They

know how to be in the school, because what their interest is is not necessarily in the community, it's their child.

I'm going to volunteer because I want my child to be in the gifted [program], I want my child to be selected for this, I want the teachers to know that I'm here so my child will get the best. To me it's a very selfish and destructive reason to be in the school. So, I'm not saying that it's a bad thing. I'm simply saying, of course it's good. But we have to figure out a way to define it. We have to figure out a way not to come to conclusions about parents' lack of participation in formalized school events to mean that parents aren't involved.

And when we ask parents to do things like help support children with their homework, understand the community and the home before you do that. I don't want you to draw the conclusion that because all I can do is give my child a pencil and a piece of paper that I care less about my child's school success than the one who –give gifts to teachers, you know they raise money or I'm home, I chaperoning or I'm a tutor or I'm on governance. The parent with the one paper and the one pencil cares the same about their children. That, to me is the part that's so disgusting. The inferences made about parents about their participation.

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**We need to understand the historical context of family involvement for different cultural groups and then somewhere the school and people in the community need to meet on some common ground to decide what is an effective parent involvement.**

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The other thing about parent involvement that I was going to say was that when I talk to parents, African American parents, I tell them to always come to school and bring everybody you know who cares about your child. They call them "big mama," "play mama," "auntie" – everybody! So that school people get the message that this child has a lot of people in this world that care. I may not have a husband and you may have just figured I was a quote, "single mother" – but, no, I'm not just a single mother. Here are all these people. And I've heard some feedback from people that say that it's really startling when the teachers see all those people piled up in there. And it's interesting. And not just for poor parents. Vanessa and I work together and when her daughter has something at school, I go. Cause her family is far away. So let them know that no, we're not just out there hanging out – no, a lot of people care about this baby.

# School Districts Supporting Parent Involvement Programs

## Brockton Public Schools (MA) – Parent Liaison Program

*Written by Jane Feroli, Specialist for Parent Involvement  
Brockton (MA) Public School Department*

*This article was first published in **The Exchange**, the quarterly newsletter for the Parent Leadership Exchange, Institute for Responsive Education in April 2001.*

The Parent Liaison Program is the cornerstone of the Brockton Public Schools Registration and Parent Information Center. Twenty-three parent liaisons hold positions at seventeen kindergarten and elementary schools and four junior high schools throughout the city. This dedicated team of involved parents works fifteen hours a week to enhance the home-school connection and make it a positive experience for all.

Parent Liaisons work with teachers, administrators and parents to coordinate and advocate for family involvement, in order to help and support academic success and achievement in school. They work to involve all parents and create ongoing mechanisms for parents to play various roles at school and at home. Their focus is to enhance the home-school connection and to get parents involved in their children's education.

In their capacities, the parent liaisons welcome parents to the schools, and coordinate school tours and open house orientation sessions for new families. They also create and publish a school newsletter and monthly parent information calendar, and design a parent information bulletin board. In addition, they recruit parent volunteers, coordinate parent workshops (including flyers, telephone calls, child care and transportation), and conduct surveys of parent and teacher needs and interests.

Technical training and workshop series, including the Parent Leadership Exchange trainings, are offered to help support parent liaisons in their jobs. A training manual with helpful ideas and suggestions has been published for their use in their jobs. There are many opportunities for developing a network

and support with the other parent liaisons. Weekly staff meetings are also held to provide a forum for an exchange of ideas, additional training, and support for each other.

Some of the unique programs being offered through the assistance of the parent liaisons include Family Nutrition Night, Bonnie the Snake Lady, Turning Point Program, Family Math & Science Nights, Sports Literacy Night, Family Craft Night and Saturday Field Trips. In their fourth year of the program, the parent liaisons have made 18,288 telephone calls, welcomed 2,438 parents to the PTO/PAC/PTA meetings, collected 18,319 written responses to the Home/School Connection Newsletter, gave 504 school tours and assisted 33,776 parents and children who attended family involvement events. Now, in the fifth year of the program, we have brought in 40,865 parents and students to our parent involvement program activities. In April 2000, the Massachusetts State Department of Education recognized the program as one of the leading parent information resource centers in Massachusetts. These activities and best practices both showcase and highlight the enthusiasm and dedication of the parent liaisons...a true asset to our school system.

### **Over the four years of the program, parent liaisons have:**

- ☆ Made 18,288 telephone calls
- ☆ Welcomed 2,438 parents
- ☆ Collected 18,319 written responses to the Home/School Connection Newsletter
- ☆ Gave 504 school tours
- ☆ Assisted 33,776 parents and children who attended family involvement events

## Providence (RI) – Teaching for Tomorrow Parent Network

Written by Sarah Friedman, Associate Director Teaching for Tomorrow Initiative, HELP Coalition  
Providence, Rhode Island

This article was first published in *The Exchange*, the quarterly newsletter for the Parent Leadership Exchange, Institute for Responsive Education in November 2001.

Teachers undertaking massive changes in practice need the support of parents. This realization was one of the biggest lessons we learned in our first year of Teaching for Tomorrow (TFT), a three-year professional development initiative geared toward supporting teachers through a massive change in their teaching practice in literacy and math. TFT is a partnership between six Providence elementary schools and the HELP Coalition, a non-profit, composed of the four private colleges and six private hospitals in Providence.

Teachers and administrators in these six schools have taught us that school change requires tremendous risk-taking. The teachers we work with are opening their classrooms to new ideas, new systems or organization, and a whole new way of interacting with their students and their colleagues. Administrators are opening their schools to broad-based team decision-making and to a new way of envisioning their own role in support of their teachers.

But teachers and administrators, as they open and change their practice, constantly think and talk about their relationship with parents. What will parents think when they see different kinds of work coming home? What will parents think when they see charts and rubrics hanging in my classroom? What if there are not immediate results in student achievement? The underlying, and often unasked question, is: how do we open a dialogue about our work with parents, especially parents from different socio-economic, racial and cultural backgrounds, especially when the shape of our work is changing so dramatically and is new to us?

The TFT Parent Network, a team of 15 to 20 parents representing each of the six schools, was created with the goal of opening a dialogue between parents and teachers and administrators at each building so that these questions, and continually deeper questions, can be discussed within the safety net of a trusting relationship.

The Network began meeting monthly in September 2000 with the charge of answering the question – how can the school support you as a parent? The parents immediately generated a list of

recommendations to the schools for how best to engage parents, especially parents from a diversity of ethnic and racial backgrounds. One thing we heard from both sides was the desire to have a more diverse group of parents engaged. Network parents spent the remainder of the year acting as a support group for one another, meeting monthly at the HELP Coalition, while carrying out their own recommendations with teachers and the principal in each of their schools.

Great work has grown out of the group. Marie Graham calls me this week with “exciting news.” She and Jenny Boone, two parents from the Vartan Gregorian Elementary School, worked all last year to define a new role of “room parent,” a liaison between teachers and each classroom’s parents. Marie and Jenny have sought every avenue to identify a parent for each room and to facilitate relationships between teachers and those room parents.

Most recently, they sent home an attachment to the annual mailing of the school’s emergency information form. Their attachment solicited parents’ talents and interests. The response was tremendous, including all but a few parents. “I have 14 parents willing to translate in four different languages, a new room parent for almost every room and quite a few parents listing five or more things they would be willing to do to help,” said Marie in a recent correspondence.

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### Parents recruiting other parents has shown to be an effective strategy.

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At the Martin Luther King Elementary School, a parent leadership team has created a similar role, the “outreach parent,” who serves as a communicator between parents and individual teachers. Outreach parents at King span a mix

of ethnic and racial backgrounds, and have begun to develop critical relationships with teachers. Last spring they worked with the students from each room to create a book of student writing about the strengths of each teacher. Parents presented those books to the teachers as a way of expressing their appreciation for the risks the teachers take and the work they do every day with their children.

At Carl G. Lauro Elementary School, a group of Spanish-speaking parents have come together to discuss ways they feel the school could support them. At Lauro, a bilingual parent from the TFT Network, acted as a facilitator and the group together drafted a list of proposals to the school, including an ESL class for parents at the building. They met again with the principal and the school district's director of family and community engagement to discuss their ideas.

At each of these schools, the parent leaders represent a multi-lingual, multi-racial face and have begun to bridge once-wide gaps between teachers and parents through one-on-one relationship building.

Of course we have hit some major roadblocks.

**This year we learned several key things that are worth sharing. They are:**

- ☆ First, changing ideas and perceptions takes time to become institutionalized, especially when change grows organically out of one-on-one relationships between parents, teachers and administrators. But we have learned that the only way we will be successful is one relationship at a time.
- ☆ Secondly, culture, race and language barriers need to be addressed head on, and discussed openly, first with a broker and then in a safe environment with teachers and parents.
- ☆ Third, teachers and administrators have to be involved as much as possible from the beginning in parent work, so that both parents and school staff feel that they are engaged in a partnership with their parents.
- ☆ And finally, structures and roles need to remain flexible based on each school's changing needs.

These six schools are intended to be pilot models for the district, so that district leaders can take what worked from the TFT schools and learn from what we have experienced in the areas of professional development and family engagement. These lessons learned will likely be the greatest asset of the parent work to the larger school district, along with the optimistic message that despite the roadblocks, the overwhelming feeling at the schools is one of new and growing dialogue.

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**According to Patricia Martinez, the district's director of community and family engagement, the TFT parents have changed the tone of a district-wide conversation between principals and teachers about parent involvement. "Principals at other schools are saying, if my colleague is doing it and it is okay, maybe I can do it too," she said. "Other schools could see the difference in the conversations where parents, teachers and administrators come together in one room and share the vision – that's very powerful. We need to do more of this across the district."**

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# Partnerships for Student Success

*Written by Don Davies, Founder of the Institute for Responsive Education*

*The following are excerpts from the original policy document.*

**School Board members and school administrators tell us that the main benefit of stronger ties with families and communities is increased academic achievement by students. Parent and community partnerships can help boost academic achievement from preschool through high school. Involved parents and the community will be more likely to support the schools' reform efforts.**

We (IRE) have learned a great deal from our research and years of work in schools about why partnerships are important and how to make them work under various conditions. Different strategies and practices will affect different outcomes. But, if strategies for collaboration are well planned, aimed at appropriate goals, and well implemented, they can have many benefits.

## Recommendations

The following recommendations which flow from research and experience will help schools beginning to develop a culture of collaboration. Such a culture should become “the way we do things around here,” in a school and a school district rather than a project, a series of events, or a funding requirement.

Projects and funding may come and go, but a school and school district culture can persist over time and have a positive influence on all who are involved. Changing “the way we do things around here” takes time, can't be mandated, but can be encouraged by example, incentives, recognition, rewards, and clear written policies.

- ☆ Adopt clear written policies on school, family, and community collaboration and back up policies with direct support.
- ☆ Align personnel policies with district's commitment to collaboration.
- ☆ Prepare school staff and parents to work collaboratively.
- ☆ Involve family members as full partners with real decision-making responsibility.

- ☆ Develop agreements with social service and health agencies to provide services for students and their families.
- ☆ Use multiple approaches to school-family communication.
- ☆ Increase opportunities for students to learn at home and in the community.
- ☆ Set up parent/family centers in every elementary, middle, and high school.
- ☆ Expand parent choice within the public system and provide good consumer information.
- ☆ Create planning and problem-solving teams (action teams).

Effective programs of school, family, and community collaboration provide a varied menu of opportunities, geared to the diverse needs of families and their children and to the particular conditions of each school and school district. What works best is a plan that is integrated with the other important objectives of the school.

A comprehensive program of partnerships will include such elements as parent education and family support, family members and community members acting as volunteers in the school, home-school communication, strategies that foster children's learning at home and in community settings, decision-making and governance mechanisms, and myriad kinds of school-community exchanges.

# Web Sites for Parent Involvement

<a href="http://www.aft.org">www.aft.org</a>	American Federation of Teachers – National web site
<a href="http://www.aitech.ac.jp/-iteslj/">www.aitech.ac.jp/-iteslj/</a>	The Internet TESL Journal
<a href="mailto:allpie@taconic.net">allpie@taconic.net</a>	Alliance for Parental Involvement in Education
<a href="http://www.edreform.com/parentpower/00apr.activist.html">www.edreform.com/parentpower/00apr.activist.html</a>	Promotes parent activism
<a href="http://eric-web.tc.columbia.edu/families/strong">http://eric-web.tc.columbia.edu/families/strong</a>	Tips for parents
<a href="http://www.education-world.com">www.education-world.com</a>	Commercial site with lots of information
<a href="http://www.familysupportamerica.org">www.familysupportamerica.org</a>	Family Support America
<a href="http://www.fape.org/">www.fape.org/</a>	Family and Advocates Partnership for Education (FAPE)
<a href="http://www.findarticles.com">www.findarticles.com</a>	Commercial site that will look up articles on many topics
<a href="http://www.partnershipschoools.org">www.partnershipschoools.org</a>	National Network of Partnership Schools – Joyce Epstein
<a href="http://www.responsiveeducation.org">www.responsiveeducation.org</a>	Institute for Responsive Education/Parent Leadership Exchange
<a href="http://www.ipl.org">www.ipl.org</a>	Internet Public Library
<a href="http://www.lacnyc.org">www.lacnyc.org</a>	Literacy Assistance Center
<a href="http://www.ncpie.org">www.ncpie.org</a>	National Coalition of Parent Involvement in Education
<a href="http://www.naesp.org/">www.naesp.org/</a>	National Association of Elementary Principals (NAESP)
<a href="http://www.npin.org">www.npin.org</a>	National Parent Information Network
<a href="http://www.ncpie.org">www.ncpie.org</a>	National Coalition of Parent Involvement in Education
<a href="http://www.ncrel.org">www.ncrel.org</a>	North Central Regional Lab – Research information/publications
<a href="http://pfie.ed.gov">http://pfie.ed.gov</a>	U.S. Department of Education Partnership for Family Involvement in Education
<a href="http://www.projectappeseed.org">www.projectappeseed.org</a>	National campaign for public school improvement
<a href="http://www.seld.org">www.seld.org</a>	Southeast Regional Lab – Building knowledge to support learning



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