

***First Annual Review of Family  
Involvement in Education***

held by

**The National Coalition  
for Parent Involvement in Education  
(NCPIE)**

**February 23, 2000**

*"Although schools have resisted change, the family has restructured. The result: 21<sup>st</sup> century families attempting to partner with 20<sup>th</sup> century schools."*

—Arnold Fege, *Education Leadership*, Volume 57, No. 7, pg. 40, April 2000

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## Executive Summary

“ In 1973, it was tough to convince many educators, educational policy makers, or funders to take parent or community involvement in schools as a serious, grown-up idea. Some saw the idea as radical or a warmed-over version of the War on Poverty. Others saw it as threatening to professional stability and the orderly running of school systems, or as ‘nice’ but not among the serious issues facing education.

But in the 1990’s, things have changed! Now everybody talks and writes about, studies, and advocates for parent and family involvement. ‘The whole village’ is widely embraced and ‘partnership’ has become a popular new mantra. It would be difficult to find a politician, educational leader, educational organization or conference that doesn’t stress families, parent involvement, and partnership. There has been an amazing and gratifying surge of interest and acceptance of the ideas of parent involvement and partnership. There are thousands of projects and initiatives and a flourishing growing business aimed at parents and parent concerns - on line, in conferences, and on CD shelves.

But the changes in schools seem to be lagging far behind the talk and the pilot projects. Only one in ten public schools has moved beyond traditional forms of parent involvement. And few of the major new reform and standards-based initiatives put parents and the community in a central role.”

—Don Davies, Founder, Institute for Responsive Education in opening remarks, NCPIE Review, 2/23/00

**O**n February 23, 2000, the National Coalition for Parent Involvement in Education (NCPIE) held its first Annual Review of Family Involvement in Education. The purpose of this Review was to bring together people from key organizations and institutions to begin a dialogue about the role of family involvement in school reform, to assess the progress made over the past few decades, to highlight successful practices as well as continued challenges, and to identify actions that will improve the scope and quality of family involvement in the future. The three main objectives were to:

- ❑ **Exchange views on the underlying values, history, and current and future state of family involvement in education;**
- ❑ **Explore ways in which we can work together to improve the quality of family involvement in education and close the achievement gap; and,**
- ❑ **Identify actions to move the agenda forward.**

Some highlights from the day included opening remarks by Don Davies, founder of the Institute for Responsive Education and leader in the field of family involvement in school reform. Don set the stage, providing an historical overview of family involvement. He reminded us of the history of the field, the origin of NCPIE, the research, and the progress that has occurred over the past few decades, and the critical issues that still confront us.

Dan Safran, Deputy Director of the Children’s Council of San Francisco, a long-time leader in the field of family involvement and the inspiration behind this Review, moderated both the morning and afternoon panels. Dan opened the morning panel by stating the four goals of family involvement.

The morning panel addressed the current state of family involvement in education, focusing their remarks on critical questions:

### **Four Goals of Family Involvement**

- 1. To improve student performance.**
- 2. To facilitate social integration.**
- 3. To strengthen democratic participation.**
- 4. To increase support for public education.**

- Has legislation mandating family involvement made a difference as in Title I, IDEA, Goals 2000, Head Start?
- What is the impact of the standards movement on family involvement? Can it help close the achievement gap?
- What are the common denominators of schools that have successfully included families? What continue to be the challenges?
- Is collaboration and partnership rhetoric or reality?

The consensus of the panel and the participants confirmed much of what Don Davies said--that “...the changes in the schools seem to be lagging far behind the talk and the pilot projects.” After the morning panel, participants were asked to identify the gains they felt had been made over the past decade and the challenges that still lie ahead. Some of the important gains include:

- Greater public awareness of the importance of family involvement in children’s learning and a recognition that schools cannot educate students alone;
- Establishment of family involvement/family rights through federal legislation as in Title I, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), Head Start and Goals 2000;
- Establishment of statewide (and in some cases, community-based) parent centers to support families;
- Recognition of the importance of early childhood development and the important role families play in child rearing;
- Research which supports the evidence that family involvement is critical to student achievement; and,
- Better communication between home and school through the use of technology (telephones in classrooms, computerized communication systems).

Some of the important challenges include:

- Training educators at the pre-service and in-service level on the importance of family involvement and on successful methods to involve families both at home and at school;
- Training families to take on leadership positions including school governance;
- Training educators and families in partnership building, including power sharing, to create true partnerships;
- Teaching families about standards and standards-based reform and how it can help close the achievement gap;
- Creating a school culture that places families at the center; and,
- Addressing the problems caused by underlying prejudice due to race, culture and language.

***“Although schools have resisted change, the family has restructured. The result: 21<sup>st</sup> century families attempting to partner with 20<sup>th</sup> century schools.”***

–Arnold Fege, President, Public Advocacy for Kids in *Education Leadership*,  
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The afternoon panel addressed a vision for the future. What needs to be done to create new roles and relationships? Below are the critical questions addressed:

- What does a “partnership” school look like?
- What must happen to create a “partnership” school?
- What must be done to change the culture of schools? How can educators be better prepared to deal with ethnic, racial and language differences of families?
- How can we bring about a greater understanding of family/community participation as an important part of our democracy?

After hearing from the afternoon panel, participants were asked to identify actions to address the challenges identified in the morning.

**The following actions have been recommended:**

- Collaborate with higher education associations, such as the American Association of Colleges of Teacher Education (AACTE), to develop the appropriate curriculum for parent/family course and field work;
- Develop training models and resources for parent groups, principals, and school systems;
- Increase awareness of the importance of family involvement in education through newspaper and magazine articles and public service campaigns;
- Create state level coalitions for family involvement in education; and,
- Promote federal legislation for state and local Parent Centers to support families and provide information and training about schools, school systems, and rights and responsibilities.

A summary of each panelist's remarks follows.

## Overview of Family Involvement

### **Don Davies, Founder, Institute for Responsive Education**

Below is a brief excerpt of Don's key points. His presentation was a highlight of the NCPIE's first annual review, setting the stage for the day's work. He stated three goals for the 21<sup>st</sup> century, and eight challenges and/or recommendations that could serve to steer the course of family involvement.

#### **History:**

The concept of family involvement in education in the United States, which dates back in one form or another to Colonial times, enjoyed a rebirth in the 1960's. At the time that I began the Institute for Responsive Education in 1973, the idea of significant parental participation in schools was a tough sell to many educators and policymakers. Many thought the idea of parent or community involvement in schools was not a serious, grown-up idea and some saw it as too radical or as a threat to the stability of schools.

Much has changed since then. There has been an amazing surge of interest and acceptance of the ideas of parental involvement and partnership. There are thousands of projects and initiatives, and a flourishing growing business aimed at parents and parenting concerns.

Despite the excitement and possibilities regarding parental involvement, very few schools—only about one in ten public schools—have move beyond traditional forms of parent involvement. Additionally, few of the major new reforms and standards-based initiatives put parents in a central role.

NCPIE was born in the 1980's under the leadership of Carol Kimmel, the president of the National PTA, and John Alden of the National School Volunteers (now called Partners in Education). NCPIE brought together in a systemic way many Washington-based educational organizations along with parent/citizen organizations for the first time. It has played an important role in convening groups and in providing increased credibility to parental involvement in education.

There are four seemingly contrasting ideas about citizen participation in the schools:

1. **Individual vs. Collective participation** -- advocacy of group interests by organizations of parents and other citizens in school activities or the activities and involvement of individual parents and citizens.
2. **Partnership or Parent power or power sharing.**
3. **Inside or Outside participation** -- independent parent groups or community organizations or inside mechanisms such as school councils, advisory committees, and parent associations directly linked to a school or district.
4. **Choice vs. Voice** -- Should dissatisfied parents stay on board and work to influence policies to bring about change, or should they opt out?

Tensions about these four areas continue to influence discussions regarding parental involvement and cause confusion about what people mean by the terms “parent involvement,” “citizen participation,” or “partnership.” I believe that these pairs should not be seen as either-or choices. I see that all eight kinds of participation can be legitimate parts of successful efforts to reform schools and give a stronger voice to families and communities in education.

### **Goals for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century**

The goals that deserve highest priority at the start of the century are the following:

1. Reducing social and educational gaps between the “haves” and the “have nots,” to move much closer to the time when all children regardless of race, social status, or family income achieve high standards of social and academic achievement.
2. Contributing more strongly to making a multi-cultural, multi-racial society work in the interest of a more productive, equitable, and democratic society.
3. Getting and keeping a substantial majority of the nation’s power elite on board in support of strengthening the public education system, including supporting substantially increased public investments in education and resisting privatizing as the strategy of choice to solve educational problems.

Schools and educators alone cannot achieve these goals. Thus, the question is: How can parental involvement, community engagement, and school-family-community partnerships contribute to achieving these goals? What might we do?

### **Recommendations:**

There are eight recommendations that may help the field of family involvement establish a course of action to reach the three goals stated above:

1. Revitalize independent grassroots parent's and citizen’s organizations to support school reform and accountability to move toward academic and social success for all children.
2. Honor and encourage both individual and collective action, both partnership and power sharing.
3. Support, help, and reward teachers much more than we do now if we want them to be partners with parents and the community.
4. Provide for both choice and voice as legitimate ways for parents to play important roles in education.
5. Win the support for higher academic standards for all and for strong accountability measures from grassroots parents and citizens, and from liberals as well as conservatives.

6. Find good alternatives to privatization, or it may overwhelm us.
7. Link school reform and community development because we know that educational progress for the “have nots” requires progress in access to affordable housing, good health care, transportation, safe streets, reduction of alcohol and drug abuse, and jobs.
8. Do not back off from seeing increased responsibility from families and communities as well as from schools for the healthy and positive social development of children. The whole village concept must put the onus on the home as well as on the school and on community institutions.

In addition, family involvement must be able to demonstrate it makes a difference in student achievement in the context of high academic standards for all children. This means that programs must be carefully designed, with the participation of all those affected by them, based whenever possible on research evidence, faithfully executed and objectively evaluated.

### **Morning Panel: Current State of Family Involvement in Education**

Below are brief excerpts with key points from each of the panelists.

#### **Dan Safran, Deputy Director of the Children's Council of San Francisco**

Dan was the moderator of both the morning and afternoon panels. He opened the morning panel by stating the four goals of family involvement:

1. **To improve student performance:** Families and educators share information and cooperate in supporting children's learning at home and at school.
2. **To facilitate social integration:** Schools and involved families play a vital role in helping other families, especially newcomers, to become familiar with and more engaged in the social and civic life of the community.
3. **To strengthen democratic participation:** By becoming involved in discussion, analysis and decision making on educational issues and school governance, parents engage in democratic practices.
4. **To increase support for public education:** Families become a major constituency of public education, advocating for - and taking action on - educational reform and improvement.

**Christine Stoneman, Policy Attorney, Center for Law and Education, Washington DC**  
**Focus: Title I and Parent Information Resource Centers**

In 1994 there were some major changes to Title I of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA). Those changes included strengthening the requirements for family involvement, high standards for all students, and accountability for schools to ensure that all students meet those standards. Title I has the strongest family involvement requirement of any federal legislation when it comes to linking family involvement to whole school reform. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) has the strongest provisions for reform for individual children and their families, making sure that individual children receive services. Title I requirements bring families into decisions about how programmatic funds will be used to ensure high quality teachers, rich curriculum, individual assistance for students who are struggling, effective instruction, *and* parent involvement at the school level. The combination of IDEA families, who have terrific advocacy skills, and Title I families, who have the tools for whole school reform, is an exciting thought.

Under Title I, schools and school districts develop and approve family involvement guidelines which are then distributed to families. Families, under these guidelines, are to be involved in how school money is being spent, and this offers potential for power sharing and partnership. Written family involvement policies offer real opportunities for families to have “a place at the table.” Accountability requirements give families tools for assessing how well schools are serving all students, getting involved in school improvement plans, and potentially taking advantage of a public school right to transfer their child out of a failing school and into a non-failing school.

Unfortunately, too often these provisions aren't met, either because schools and communities don't understand them, or because they only give them "lip service." For instance, in far too many schools, principals "select" which parents they will work with on Title I issues. Many times, parents, particularly parents in school-wide programs, don't even know they are Title I parents. And though schools sometimes have parent liaisons or parent centers paid for with Title I funds, rarely are those schools really helping parents understand standards-based reform and how to ensure that their children are getting a high quality education, or meaningfully including parents in decision-making about the Title I program.

That is why it is critical that parents have the support, training, and information they need to use these tools in ways that result in high quality programming for their children. Parent Information Resource Centers, and a new concept, Local Family Information Centers, provide that support.

There are currently 58 state and regional level Parent Information Resource Centers (PIRCs), funded through Goals 2000 at \$30 million through grants from the Department of Education. They are to provide support, training, and information to all parents on issues ranging from early childhood development, to standards, to how to work with schools. Those centers ought to be

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continued in the next Elementary and Secondary Education Act Reauthorization, and their appropriations increased significantly. Further, they ought to be expanded to include Local Family Information Center projects (LFICs projects) which would focus intensive assistance to families of students in areas where there are large numbers of Title I schools, large concentrations of limited English proficient families, and large numbers of schools in need of improvement. These independent centers would help parents understand, for instance, how to read school performance report cards; how to work effectively with the schools to ensure high quality programming for all students; how to know that their children are meeting high standards; and, to understand that family involvement is meaningful and is leading to improved academic outcomes in their schools.

**Recommendations:**

1. That \$100,000,000 be authorized for independent parent centers, \$50 million for Parent Information Resource Centers to serve families at the state and regional level, and \$50 million for local family information center projects to provide intense information, resources, and support for parents of students served by ESEA.

**Paula Goldberg, Executive Director, PACER Center, Minneapolis, MN**

**Focus: Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA)**

The PACER Center is the Parent Training and Information Center (PTI) for Minnesota families who have a child with a disability. PACER is also a Parent Information Resource Center (PIRC) authorized and funded under Goals 2000 legislation, serving all children and families in Minnesota. In addition to these two statewide programs, PACER has two national projects - the ALLIANCE which provides technical assistance to all the Parent Training Information Centers and Community Parent Resource Centers throughout the country, and the Families and Advocates Partnership in Education (FAPE), a nationwide partnership to inform families and advocates about IDEA.

Although there are still many challenges, legislation has been pivotal in bringing families into the

**Included in this landmark piece of legislation was a revolutionary concept in terms of family involvement in education. Regulations to implement IDEA state that parents are to be active, equal participants along with school personnel in developing their child's individualized education program.**

educational process. In 1975 Congress passed IDEA, representing the first national commitment to guarantee a free appropriate public education to all children with disabilities. Included in this landmark piece of legislation was a revolutionary concept in terms of family involvement in education. Regulations to implement IDEA state that parents are to be active, equal participants along with school personnel in developing their child's individualized education program.

Subsequent amendments to IDEA have reinforced the concept and strengthened the role of parents in educational decision making for their child. Further, IDEA '97 expands parental involvement within the context of school-based improvement plans, by requiring that school districts that wish to implement such plans ensure that the parents of children with disabilities are involved in the design, evaluation, and as appropriate, implementation of the plan.

There is at least one PTI in each state, funded under IDEA to help families understand their child's right to an education and to teach them how to be effective partners in their child's education. With continued legislative and financial support, it is possible to achieve even more positive changes with federal programs such as IDEA.

**Recommendations:**

1. Increase advocacy training for families on how to participate in their child's IEP;
2. Obtain legislation to support family involvement, not just enforcement of current legislation;
3. Train parents as leaders and decision-makers.

**Maggie Holmes, Partnership Director, National Head Start Association, Alexandria, VA  
Focus: Head Start**

Head Start was founded in 1965 at the time of the Civil Rights movement and President Johnson's War on Poverty. Education and democracy are inherent to the Head Start philosophy, and families play a critical role in every aspect of its program from policy and decision making to day to day participation. Head Start is grounded in the belief that family involvement is key to children's development and academic success.

There is a difference between mandating family involvement, as in IDEA and Title I, and creating a system with the underlying belief that family involvement is intrinsic to a child's success in life. Head Start created such a system—and they came up with a dual focus:

1. Families need to be a part of the decision-making process for program development and program design.
2. Families need to be empowered so they can take a leadership role in the education of their children.

Research has demonstrated that Head Start makes a difference in the lives of children, families, and communities.

**Recommendations:**

1. To view family involvement with a larger lens.
2. Create systems that foster family involvement at all levels.

**Vicki Rafel, Vice President for Legislation, National PTA, Chicago, IL**  
**Focus: Legislative actions by the National PTA**

Although society is changing, the PTA is alive and well. The PARENT Act, (Parental Accountability, Recruitment, and Education and Training ) is to ensure that parent involvement is not forgotten in the current reauthorization of Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA). Legislation is very important. Through legislation parents can get involved in areas such as reviewing local education plans, research, professional development and higher education. Through legislation one can increase the use of technology to strengthen family involvement, and increase the role of families in creating drug and violence-free schools and communities. There are pieces of legislation that the PTA is optimistic about, and there are others it is worried about. We should all be concerned about efforts in Congress to change much of the funding for ESEA to block grants. This would give the control over the distribution of these funds to state governors. This is a critical year for everyone to "keep an eye" on the legislative actions regarding family involvement and ESEA.

National PTA also recently launched a national, multifaceted, family involvement initiative, *Building Successful Partnerships*. The goals of the program are to increase awareness of the National PTA's National Standards for Parent/Family Involvement Programs, train representatives to give instructional workshops on all facets of parent involvement, and promote the use of National PTA's book, *Building Successful Partnerships: A Guide to Developing Parent and Family Involvement Programs*, an implementation guide to the National Standards.

The program delivers the message that family involvement is critical to a child's education to administrators, teachers, family involvement professionals, Title I coordinators and families. The National PTA has trained members to provide workshops throughout the country, U.S. Virgin Islands, and overseas where PTA serves Department of Defense schools in the Pacific and Europe. The book provides field-tested strategies for overcoming barriers to family involvement as well as examples of successful programs around the country. It can be ordered directly from [www.pta.org](http://www.pta.org).

**Recommendations:**

1. Offer training to parents, teachers and administrators on how to overcome barriers and work together to create meaningful family involvement in schools;
2. Form action teams made up of families, teachers, administrators and community members to create family involvement policies and action plans for implementing policies; and,
3. Reach out and work with public officials, legislators, businesses, and other civic and social organizations to create family-friendly environments and communities that are supportive of schools.

**Anne Henderson, Senior Consultant, Institute for Education and Social Policy,  
Washington DC**

**Focus: Standards-Based Reform**

For the first time, we have clear standards about what children should know and be able to do. This is a great benefit because public standards create a common language that families and schools can use.

However, standards-based reform is a forked road:

The **high road** of standards gives families tremendous leverage -- leverage they never had before. It gives them the ability to be involved in their children's schools working toward common goals. It also allows them to be involved as families in a community that is pressing the schools for far better outcomes.

The **low road** approach to standards-based reform is one that focuses on test scores not student performance. It is top down and punitive. Instead of providing thoughtful diagnosis and support, it cracks the whip. Children are punished for not having the opportunity to learn, and teachers are humiliated, not helped.

Family involvement is at a crossroad. Standards-based reform can provide a much higher standard for family engagement. It can expand family involvement beyond the open door and the family resource center. Successful standards-based schools avoid the blame game. Instead of pitting one group against the other, they place their energies in creating school communities where everyone is responsible for making sure all students learn. And this is where the focus needs to be, creating school communities where everybody is working to improve student achievement. By focusing on children first, the other values of family involvement, such as facilitating social integration and building democracy, will follow.

**Recommendations:**

1. Offer leadership training for parents so they understand how the system works and can make it work for them.
2. Use student work and scoring guides to explain how standards work in the classroom. Involve parents and students in assessing the quality of student work.
3. Make sure the language of standards is clear and phrased in words people use every day. If parents don't understand it, students won't either.

**Laurel Clark, Network Coordinator, National Network of Partnership Schools**  
**Focus: National Network of Partnership Schools**

The National Network of Partnership Schools is based on the research of Joyce Epstein at the Center on School, Family, and Community Partnerships at Johns Hopkins University. The Network began in 1996 and is committed to helping schools, districts and states build strong programs of school, family and community partnership. Currently, membership includes 13 State Departments of Education, 138 school districts in 24 states, and over 1,000 schools in 33 states.

All sites agree to five basic membership requirements; 1) to use the framework of the 6 types of involvement; 2) to form an Action Team that includes administrators, parents, teachers, and students (middle and high school); 3) to allocate an annual budget for their work on partnerships; 4) to commit time for training, planning, implementation, and evaluation; and, 5) To communicate their progress and challenges to the National Network each year via UPDATE, the Network's annual survey. District and state leaders also commit to helping the districts and schools in their areas meet these requirements.

The goal of the National Network is to help its members build partnership programs that exhibit excellence and move toward permanence. Nationally, there are many challenges. Changes in leadership of partnership programs, integrating the Action Teams and Plans for Partnerships into the policy contexts of each site (streamlining them with school improvement plans, and other existing programs), and building leadership capacity are some of these challenges.

What the National Network has found is that if continuous attention and support is given to schools, districts, and states, they can improve and build upon programs of family involvement. It is very important that this is a coherent process -- one that incorporates school improvement and is consistent across time.

**Recommendations:**

1. Ongoing teacher and administrator training for family/community involvement is very important, particularly in light of the staffing changes that occur in schools and districts each year.
2. Community collaboration and family involvement research should continue.
3. We must continue to encourage young scholars to study the topic of family/community involvement in education.

## **Afternoon Panel: The Vision for the Future: New Roles and Relationships**

**Sarita Brown, Executive Director, White House Initiative on Educational Excellence for Hispanic Americans, U.S. Department of Education**

**Focus: Hispanic-Americans**

President Clinton appointed a Commission of 25 people in 1994, national educational leaders from across the country, and charged them with looking at the conditions of education for Latinos in America -- from early childhood through graduate and professional education.

The Commission conducted research and held town hall meetings and in 1996, submitted to the President their report called *Our Nation on the Fault Line: Hispanic American Education*. You can find a copy of this report at the U.S. Department of Education's web site ([www.ed.gov](http://www.ed.gov)). The report emphasizes that schools exist in communities; that children are part of families; and to change the current educational attainment rate of our young people (as challenging as it may be), we need to take an integrated and holistic approach.

This commission is made up of activists that decided to create a mechanism to catalyze social change. The Commission wanted to respond to the assumption that Latinos were dropping out of schools at an alarming rate because of "cultural conditions." The Commission decided to build on the strength of the family and to put families at the center of the discussion on "Excelencia en Educacion." Latinos families want the best for their children, which includes a good education. Yet many of these same family members are not high school or college graduates themselves, resulting in an information gap, not a support gap. The "Excelencia en Educacion" conference series has been a five-city experiment where forums attracted almost 4,500 families, 350 educators, elected officials, Univision (airwaves), and corporations such as State Farm and AT&T.

Each conference was a labor intensive event, but it demonstrated that it is possible for a very small number of people to partner with business, elected officials and local schools to create and experience a day and a half working with families on topics that are familiar: Parents as First Teachers; the meaning of "Excelencia para Todos;" math; reading; and college readiness. We now need to make this happen in all communities.

The U.S. Department of Education is a resource, but the real change happens at a local level. The final outcome of the series of Excelencia's conferences is to produce an information kit that will allow communities across the country to stage their own conferences. The White House Initiative's workplan ends December 2000; however, NCPIE's Review participants can continue to support and encourage this effort long after this Initiative ends.

### **Recommendations:**

1. Partner with the White House Initiative in the dissemination and use of the Excelencia kit to be released in September 2000.

**Warlene Gary, Manager, Urban Institute, National Education Association**  
**Focus: Action at the Local Level**

We need to move away from what Martin Luther King, Jr. called the “paralysis of analysis.” We all know what works, and what we need is the will to work at the local level. There is a need for more foot soldiers to share information with parents and to build from the local level. We need to look at the data from the Kids Count survey to address the larger social issues of race and elitism. The issue is how are we going to provide for kids who live in abominable situations. We need to focus on the children that need the most, and reach out to the parents that do not understand how to access the system. The Community Centers of Excellence in Florida funded by the Florida Endowment Fund are working with low income parents hands-on to get their kids to improve around the issue of excellence. They train the parents on how to get their kids ready for college. You can not have literate kids unless you have literate families.

In addition, we need to focus on the need to create high priority networks. It is critical that we help build relationships at the local level among all of the stake-holders: educators, administrators, parents, and businesses. Moreover, we need to have public engagement conversations directly at the community level. It is expensive and time consuming, but we need to have these conversations. We also need to influence political candidates, and to ensure that politicians understand the importance of parental involvement in education, and that they support parental involvement as part of their agenda. There is urgency for action, and the need to build relationships at the local level.

**We need to move away from what Martin Luther King, Jr. called the “paralysis of analysis.” We all know what works, and what we need is the will to work at the local level.**

**Recommendations:**

1. Create partnerships to reach children and families with the most needs.
2. Initiate community conversations among all stakeholders about families and community involvement in schools.

**Kelly Butler, Executive Director, Parents for Public Schools**  
**Focus: Recruiting and Mobilizing for Public Schools**

Parents for Public Schools has the goal of mobilizing the parents of children in the public schools. This is a constituency that has not been mobilized -- a powerful energy that is still untapped. In 1989, a group of white parents from Mississippi decided that their children needed to be educated in the “real” world and decided to send their kids to public schools. The group enlisted 600 white families, like themselves, and then approached middle-class African-American parents who had also fled the system. The driving force was the desire for parents to “know kids of different backgrounds not just those who are white and middle class... and for the

kids to be educated in a world that looks like the world they live in.”

Parents for Public Schools works to make the school better for all children. If the schools are not good for all children then they are not good for any child. The organization has evolved over the last ten years. And despite its growth, it is still in the recruitment mode.

**If the schools are not good for all children then they are not good for any child.**

It began with the mission of: 1) Recruitment: for parents to stay in or come back to public schools; 2) Improvement: to widen the lens of what family involvement is at every level, not only at the homework table, but also at the decision-making level as well. PPS creates new mechanisms for this kind of involvement; and, 3) Community-wide advocacy: a credible bridge

between the schools and the community, to be a voice for change, and a broker to change the attitudes of parents about the schools.

This organization believes in a new brand of parent involvement where parents are not just passive consumers but are the involved owners of public education. The organization is not school-based, but community-based. All PPS chapters must reflect the demographics of public schools and the community. PPS is a solution-oriented movement, where parents are pro-active on issues like overcrowding, equitable funding, academic standards, and teacher quality. PPS chapters insist on equal partnership, and their work is based on the notion that for schools to be effective, they must reinvent the relationships that exist among all stakeholders in the system. The challenge is to find a common agenda and to avoid pitting parents against each other.

### **Recommendations:**

1. Recognize that only by giving parents a voice in school governance can you give them a choice about their children's education.
2. Recognize that partnership isn't just power; it's about identifying and acting on mutual interests.
3. We must invest in parent involvement in equal proportion to our investment in improving teacher practice—neither levels are sufficient at present.

### **Holly Kreider, Project Manager and Research Associate, Harvard Family Research Project Focus: Pre-service Preparation of Teachers**

Teachers need concrete skills, knowledge and positive attitudes regarding family involvement. Higher education and teacher preparation is important in building teachers skills. There is research that states that the skills around family involvement are missing pieces of the curriculum. Some teachers have said that they do not have good models or tools for how to involve parents. The skills for administrators regarding family involvement are equally

important. The Harvard Family Research Project's study that resulted in the *New Skills for New Schools* report, surveyed over 60 teachers education programs in 22 states in the 1990s and found that very little was happening in the area of family involvement. Even the actual courses were limited in scope. There is a parallel in what is happening in the teacher education programs to what is happening with family involvement in the schools. Most of the information tends to focus on parent/teacher conferences and supporting children's learning at home.

The positive side is the recognition that there is a need for change, particularly when it comes to parents being partners, and decision-makers, and sharing power. In general, educators don't have good models or good tools for including family involvement in their curriculum. The Harvard Family Research Project has identified promising programs and the practices and methods that they are using for family involvement training. In particular, the Research Project has become intrigued with the case method as a way to build critical thinking skills among aspiring teachers and has been developing some real life cases that depict the dilemmas families and schools face when working with each other.

### **Recommendations:**

1. **Policy level:** We need to strengthen teacher certification requirements and consider performance-based assessment of teacher education programs that require students to demonstrate the ability, skills and knowledge to work with families before they get to schools.
2. **Teacher education practice:** Teacher education programs can learn from innovative models that are interdisciplinary, small and experiential. These include cultural immersion, and community service internships, where aspiring teachers work closely with families and communities. It's important to have multiple methods to support teachers that include theory, research, face to face, pre-service, and ongoing development programs.
3. **Public and community level:** We must also engage parents and community members to improve higher education for aspiring teachers by sharing their experiences and expertise.
4. **All levels:** Bring all stakeholders together, including teacher educators, credentialing institutions, education advocates, parent and community members, and professional organizations to deepen the discussion and arrive at consensus about the role of higher education in family involvement.

**Arnold Fege, President, Public Advocacy for Kids**

**Focus: Public Engagement, Democracy and Family Involvement**

How can schools get beyond the conventional, largely procedural approach to collaborative decision-making and superficial family involvement and instead pursue a vision of participatory democracy where parents and families are equal partners in the education process?

Let's start by saying that there are heroic efforts around the country where public education means more than raising achievement scores, avoiding high stakes sanctions, gaining recognition or making schools orderly (although many of these schools have accomplished such things). There are schools that are creating caring, democratic learning communities for both their families and their students. Using the cultural traditions of Jefferson, Lincoln, Jane Addams, and King, these schools have distinguished themselves from the market conception of the common public good that separates ends and means. In many cases, reform has started to sound like a business model that poses worker training, customer satisfaction, and productivity increases as a substitute for civic engagement. It is clear that if we employ primarily private strategies to improve public education, we won't get to the democratic ends. Building customer-only dynamics without civic participation will NOT give us a democratic model of parental involvement.

**By looking through the civic lens, I contend that we can get to the meaning, to the struggle, and to the needs of our kids much more readily than we will through the lens of test scores, social promotion, and high stakes consequences.**

By looking through the civic lens, I contend that we can get to the meaning, to the struggle, and to the needs of our kids much more readily than we will through the lens of test scores, social promotion, and high stakes consequences. Improving schools requires far more than individuals embracing a better education for their own child or making choices for their own lives, as if social conditions and market conditions were neutral. It is important that we focus on the interconnectedness that defines how we, as citizens, must forge a common, public good. Americans must come together in a public sphere, apart from the market place and outside of their homes and churches, to deliberate and solve collective problems. This public space must bring together EVERYONE, not just a privileged few, to actively learn and identify what is hopeful for this next generation.

We must support continuous learning so that our civic life can thrive. In my travels, I am struck by the civic passion in our nation's public schools. Whenever I find schools engaging their students in rich and challenging academic work, I usually find families and the community driven by their own commitment for the public good. And frequently, this is against countervailing forces to the contrary. But watching these schools struggle to reform against many odds imposed by the bureaucratic structure forces me to recognize how easily and how often positive passion for the public good is thwarted.

Contrast the democratic view of civic virtue with the increasingly popular conception of public life as a marketplace. From this perspective, Americans come together to exchange goods and services to optimize each individual's consumption, rather than to deliberate and alleviate bad schools. Rather than developing relations grounded in a broad range of shared interests, we limit our interactions to the exchange of goods and services. Clearly a market vision of civic life is grounded largely in the nation's competitive, hierarchical economic structure, rather than its

more egalitarian ideals. Too often, the reform mill short-circuits lofty reform goals through its overly technical rational approach. Ultimately, school reform is a cultural issue that requires the local level to support reform and then adapt it to the local context. It does nothing to press local policymakers or educators to recognize or challenge the norms and political dimensions of their efforts. Most often the reform mill solicits educators' buy-in, seeking to ignore and deflect local norms. It argues the reform message exclusively as practices that lead to more practical and efficient distribution of decision-making power and school resources. The reform mill seeks to maintain an environment that is uncontentious. Consequently, the mill sticks with policies and innovations that rarely venture beyond the most abstract and uncontested of platitudes such as: All children can learn; All children deserve to reach their potential; or schools must reach out to families. Legitimate avenues for questioning the values and politics that drive much contemporary school reform must be created and parents must become an integral part of the reform discussion and dialogue.

Schools need to distribute power more evenly among administrators and teachers, among educators and students, and between the school and the community. Unfortunately, most schools are hierarchical and bureaucratic. Principals have power over teachers, teachers have power over kids and families, families have power over kids but not the school, especially if they are poor. Family participation means that parents almost always are required to support the schools' work or that they are taught skills and home routines by the school to foster success. Family involvement should not come AFTER big decisions are made, but should be a major part of the agenda setting process. This process may not lead to where the policy wonks think we should go, but it does engage all of us in respectful discussions related to shared common and democratic experiences. That and that alone, will sustain the better schools we all seek.

### **Recommendations:**

1. Families and students must be placed at the apex of school reform. Design a family and community involvement plan to create a closer relationship between home and school.
2. Target the absent family. The family who does not become involved is as important as the family who does. Develop an outreach strategy.
3. Build a civic "contract" with families and the community, allowing for shared decision-making and power sharing.
4. Communicate with parents and other adults in a language they can understand. Have bilingual home-school liaisons visit non-English speaking parents to personalize school communications. Enlist interpreters to assist in effective communications.