

BREAKING RANKS IN PRACTICE BREAKING RANKS IN PRACTICE

Are We There Yet?

Parent involvement is vital to school improvement, but how do you measure it—and how can you increase it?

By Patti Kinney

Patti Kinney (kinneyp@principals.org) is the associate director of middle level services at NASSP, a former principal of Talent (OR) Middle School, and the 2003 MetLife/NASSP National Middle Level Principal of the Year.

Schools that are trying to improve often grapple with the question, What will it look like when we get there? The *Breaking Ranks* framework calls for schools to have personalized learning environments, but what are the observable indicators that it's happened? Educators hear continuous talk about rigorous curriculum, engaging instruction, and authentic assessment, but how does that talk translate into practices in the classroom? They know that for students to be fully successful, they must work collaboratively with the students' parents and the community, but how do educators determine the level and quality of that participation?

Fortunately, collaborative work done in Kentucky over the past several years has resulted in the creation of school-level descriptors that have been designed to help schools evaluate the extent of their family and community involvement. A commission with the goal of giving "every child... a parent or another adult who knows how to support that student's academic achievement" (Kentucky Department of Education, 2007, p. 2) was formed to examine how Kentucky schools could better engage parents in their children's education. The commission's complete report can be downloaded from the Kentucky Department of Education's Web site.

Recommendations in the *Breaking Ranks* framework call for middle level and high schools to "engage students' families as partners in the students' education" (NASSP, 2004, p. 18; NASSP, 2007, p. 24). But too often that involvement is measured solely by the number of parents who join the PTA, go to conferences, and attend school activities or by the numbers of volunteers and the hours they put

in—all of which are good measures of participation but not of true engagement. Instead, consider using Kentucky's guidelines to examine your school's effort to involve parents:

- Relationship building: the school staff builds productive, personal relationships with the parents of all students
- Communications: two-way information about students' academic achievement and individual needs takes many forms and flows regularly between the school staff and the parents
- Decision making: the school staff encourages, supports, and expects parents to be involved in school-improvement decisions and to monitor and assist with school improvement
- Advocacy: for each student, the school staff identifies and supports a parent or other adult who can take personal responsibility for understanding and speaking for that student's learning needs
- Learning opportunities: the school staff ensures that families have multiple opportunities to understand how to support their children's learning
- Community partnerships: the school staff engages and partners with community members to plan and implement substantive work to improve student achievement.

This circles back to the initial question, What does it look like when we get there? Recognizing the need for specific, observable practices, the commission created a set of rubrics that schools can use as a self-evaluation tool for each of the six objectives. (See figure 1.)

Figure 1

This is a portion of the communications rubric from *The Missing Piece of the Proficiency Puzzle*.

Objective 2: Communications

Two-way information in many forms flows regularly between school staff and parents* about students' academic achievement and individual needs.

| Distinguished | Proficient | Apprentice | Novice |
|--|--|---|--|
| Multiple two-way communication in the home language are used to communicate academic goals, class work, and homework, and grades. (See Proficient examples.) | School staff implements systematic efforts to inform parents about academic goals, class work, grades and homework for their children in their home language. (For example, using classroom contracts, student assignment books, homework websites, and online grade books.) | School staff relies on one-way communication in English to inform parents about academic goals, class work, grades and homework. (For example, newsletters, marquees, and agendas.) | School staff uses only one-way communication with parents to inform them about student work. (For example, student report cards and behavior reports.) |
| District/school staff, parents and community stakeholders work together to learn from and use all resources available to meet the student's and parent's learning needs. | School staff offers varied ways that parents can share information with teachers about their children's learning needs. (For example, phone and e-mail contacts, offering parent conferences, and making home visits.) | School staff uses informal conversation and/or a parent teacher conference to listen to parents or inform parents of students' learning needs. | Parents receive information about student's learning needs when the student is failing academically. |
| School and district staffs use several strategies to involve community leaders to assist in parent education on issues directly related to student achievement. | School staff partners with community leaders and organizations to build parent understanding of academic expectations, school strategies, and student achievement results. | School staff partners with community leaders and organizations to build parent understanding of academic expectations, school strategies, and student achievement results. | School staff rarely provides general information to the community about academic expectations of students. |

* By parent or family, we mean a natural, adoptive or foster parent; or other adult serving as parent, such as a close relative, legal or educational guardian, and/or a community or agency advocate

Source: Kentucky Department of Education. (2007). The missing piece of the proficiency puzzle: Recommendations for involving families and community in improving student achievement. Retrieved from www.education.ky.gov/NR/rdonlyres/45597738-F31B-4333-9BB9-34255F02BC6D/0/PACtheMissingPiecev2.pdf

Although some indicators in the rubrics will need to be tweaked to match specific state and district policies and guidelines, the data gathered through the self-assessment can be valuable in determining how to better engage the parents at your school in their children's education. A possible plan for doing this can be developed by the school's leadership team (including its parent members) following the process circle defined in *Breaking Ranks: A Field Guide for Leading Change*:

- Gather and analyze data: Combine local, relevant data on parent and community involvement with the data gained through the self-assessment. Analyze the data to look for patterns, strengths, areas for improvement, and so forth.
- Explore possibilities: Using descriptors from the "distinguished" end of the rubrics, discuss new ways to involve disengaged parents in the school. Determine which practices will have the greatest impact on the highest number of parents.
- Assess readiness and build capacity: Does your staff understand and embrace the idea of customer satisfaction? Are there cultural or language barriers that must be addressed? What professional development is needed for staff members and for parents?

Involved parents develop more positive attitudes toward school and school personnel, help gather support, and bring additional resources to benefit the schools.

- Create and communicate the plan: One size does not fit all when it comes to communicating with parents. Ensure that the invitation for increased parent involvement is communicated frequently and in as many ways as possible to reach your unique school community.
- Implement plan; monitor and adjust: Does the data suggest your plan is working? Are parents involved with their child's education in more-meaningful ways? Are there other areas that must be addressed? Continue to gather and analyze data and adjust your plan as you move toward your goal of increasing parent involvement in your school.

In 1987, the *MetLife Survey of the American Teacher* found that

involved parents develop more positive attitudes toward school and school personnel, help gather support, and bring additional resources to benefit the schools. Teachers who participated in a parent involvement program improved their teaching and reported much greater job satisfaction. In addition, these schools reported that parent involvement programs prove to be a cost-effective way to increase student achievement. (Louis Harris & Associates, Inc., 1987)

Today, 23 years later, shouldn't this still hold true as schools continue to seek better and more-effective ways to improve student performance? **PL**

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