

Family and Community Engagement



Introduction

Family and community engagement has been neglected during Superintendent Payzant's tenure. If the new superintendent is going to take the district to the next level, parent involvement must be strengthened. To do so calls for a radical shift in the culture of the Boston Public Schools (BPS) and a reorganization of the family and community engagement system from a centralized to a school-based model. Parents must be embraced as full partners in their children's education and be given the tools and training to support their children's learning.

Studies have shown that students with involved parents, no matter what their income or background, are more likely to earn higher grades and test scores, enroll in higher level programs, pass their classes and be promoted, show improved behavior, and graduate and go on to postsecondary education.

Gains in reading and math have been linked to teacher outreach to parents and to parent participation in workshops on helping children at

home. Schools with highly rated parent-partnership programs make greater gains on state tests than schools with lower-rated programs.

These studies point to parent involvement as an important strategy for reducing achievement gaps. With training and encouragement, it is possible for all parents—regardless of income and education level—to become engaged in supporting their children's learning.

Many challenges make it difficult for families to be involved in the public schools in Boston. Some schools are not welcoming to parents, some staff do not relate respectfully to low-income adults, and language and cultural differences often create confusion and misunderstanding. Parents are disengaged for a variety of reasons. There are parents who have so much faith in the educational system that they feel they do not need to be involved, while others disengage out of distrust. Relationships between parents and school staff are too often distant and disconnected.

These are serious challenges, but it is fair to say that the biggest barrier has been the BPS

The majority of parents do not receive the information they need in order to understand and navigate the complex BPS system or get essential training on how to help their children thrive in school.

leadership's failure to value, adequately invest in, and promote family and community engagement. The current superintendent, admitting that family engagement is not his strength, has given himself a C-minus in this area. Because of this lack of leadership, we have a floundering system. The majority of parents do not receive the information they need in order to understand and navigate the complex BPS system or get essential training on how to help their children thrive in school.

BPS's approach to family involvement has undergone many changes during the past few years. In 2002, the superintendent called for consolidating the family engagement system, a move that unfortunately included defunding the four parent advocacy groups that had been active in the city: the Citywide Parents Council, the Special Education Parent Advisory Council, the Bilingual Master Parents Advisory Council, and the Boston Parent Advisory Council for Title 1. Without funding, these groups were weakened or disappeared, and parents were left without an official advocacy voice.

Parents and community groups successfully pressured the superintendent to create a new post—Deputy Superintendent for Family and Community Engagement—to raise the profile of family involvement and to find a champion to lead the family engagement system. Family Resource Centers (FRCs), intended to offer parents one-stop shopping, were established, and new staff were hired with a mandate to:

- 1) provide training to principals and teachers in how to work in partnership with parents,
 - 2) conduct workshops that help parents learn how to help their children improve academically,
 - 3) help families gain access to services, and
 - 4) administer the student registration process.
- However, the registration process so overwhelmed the FRCs that they could not address their other three mandates.

Parents reported extreme frustration with the FRCs, citing hours-long waits, misinformation, and disrespectful treatment. The FRCs had become little more than registration centers, with very poor customer service.

Frustrated parents and community groups pushed for removing registration from the FRCs. The superintendent agreed to do so, but tried to impose a significant cutback in family engagement staff, which would have undercut the department's ability to initiate and manage family involvement activities. Community groups succeeded in preserving three special-education family engagement specialists and adding three bilingual outreach specialists.

Because of weak leadership, creation of a school-based system for family involvement has proceeded at a snail's pace. In 2000, the School Committee convened a Family and Community Engagement Task Force, which recommended placing "trained family liaisons" in the schools. It took BPS five years to create just 15 Family and

Community Outreach Coordinator (FCOC) positions in a system of 145 schools.

Amid strong community support, \$895,000 was allocated in the 2005–2006 BPS budget to staff 15 full-time family coordinator positions. Parents and outside groups partnered with the BPS to develop a job description and performance measures, and an astounding 73 schools submitted proposals, demonstrating a significant demand for help in engaging parents at the school level. (In school year 2006–2007, there will be 17 family coordinators.)

A preliminary assessment of the Family and Community Outreach Coordinator project was very positive. The external evaluator, Dr. Steven Constantino of Family Friendly Schools, stated in his report to the School Committee this March: “There is universal agreement among parents, principals, and personnel that the program should continue Parents made clear that they wanted the program to not only continue, but to expand to all schools in Boston.”

During interviews conducted during the assessment, parent satisfaction with the program was high. Here is a typical quote: “I can’t imagine schools that don’t have a parent coordinator. I feel for a child to succeed it has to be parents, school, and students. And when I tried to go to the school, I couldn’t get any help. I am glad that [an FCOC] was there to assist me. I felt so disconnected before. I was happy that she was someone I could turn to and ask for help.”



Sustaining the FCOC program and expanding it to every school must be a high priority for the new superintendent.

The Need for Change

The school-based FCOC initiative seems to be working, but the rest of the family engagement system is not functioning effectively. It should be reorganized into a school-based system in which family coordinators are supported by a strong middle-management team, with a strong, visionary deputy superintendent at the helm.

Deputy Superintendent for Family and Community Engagement

The Deputy Superintendent for Family and Community Engagement must be a passionate champion of family engagement, able to raise the “parent voice” internally, encouraging where needed and challenging where appropriate. As the lead advocate within BPS for the interests of families, the deputy superintendent must make parent engagement part of the district’s culture and take a systemic approach to meeting the needs of all families, including

limited-English-proficient families and parents of students with disabilities.

According to the recommendations drawn up when the post was created, the Deputy Superintendent for Family and Community Engagement should:

- Develop a strategy for expanding the number and improving the quality of school-based family centers.
- Develop a strategy for training principals and teachers, so that every school is able to build family and community partnerships that support student learning.
- Develop a strategy for ensuring consistent parent and community feedback about the quality of each school and the quality of district services for parents and families. This information should be made public and should be a component of the evaluations of district and school-based personnel.
- Oversee all financial resources that are designated for parent and community engagement (this includes the portions of the Annenberg and Carnegie grants, as well as Title 1, GSP, and other funds).
- Identify best practices for engaging parents and families in ways that support student learning, and develop a strategy for sharing those practices citywide.

These are good directives, but efforts to carry them out have been less than adequate. The current leadership lacks direction, initiative, follow through, and seems not to have an understanding of family and community engagement issues.



Family and Community Outreach Coordinator Project

In order for family involvement to impact student performance, it must happen at the school level. The FCOC pilot project is a step in this direction, albeit one that is very limited in size. Now just a year old, the FCOC project has placed 15 family and community outreach coordinators in 17 out of Boston's 145 schools (again, beginning in September 2006, there will be 17 coordinators). The job of the family coordinator is to build partnerships between home and school through many and varied routes, including:

- working with families, staff, and community organizations to create a welcoming school environment
- enhancing parents' capacity to support their children's learning

- advocating for parents and teaching them to advocate for themselves
- building trusting relationships between parents and staff and among parents
- increasing parent participation at school activities (open houses, parent-teacher conferences, athletic events, performances, etc.) and in school governance
- helping to bridge language and cultural barriers
- enhancing the capacity of teachers and staff to collaborate with parents
- building partnerships between the school and community organizations and institutions (businesses, colleges and universities, social service agencies, faith-based organizations, healthcare centers)

The family coordinator organizes classes and workshops to build parents' skills, makes home visits, conducts trainings for teachers and staff on family involvement, develops and coordinates a school-volunteer program, and serves as an informational resource center for families and as a liaison to community services.

The FCOC project should be sustained and expanded, and the overall family engagement structure should be reorganized to support that model.

A successfully transformed system will appreciate and affirm parent involvement and know how to build on the strengths that parents bring.

Vision of Change

Family and community engagement will flower in Boston. Teachers, school administrators, and central staff will share a deep belief that engaged families and communities improve student performance and help shrink achievement gaps. A successfully transformed system will appreciate and affirm parent involvement and know how to build on the strengths that parents bring.

Every school in Boston will have:

- *A fully funded family center staffed by a family and community outreach coordinator.* The family coordinator will support families, teachers, and the community in their efforts to assist students in achieving educational excellence and bridging the gap between home, school, and community.
- *A policy and practice of respecting parents as full partners in the education of their children.* Parents and teachers will work collaboratively to find ways to support student learning and increase student achievement. Relationships between parents and teachers will be constructive, and communication will be effective. These relationships will be nurtured and strengthened by the family coordinator, with support from the Office of Family and Community Engagement.
- *Good communication systems and strong parent outreach.* Teacher and parent communication will go beyond the book bag, and parent participation will go beyond the bake sale. Contact with parents will be initiated before problems arise. There will be phone conversations, e-mails, and home visits. BPS will be creative in finding respectful ways to communicate with parents, especially low-income parents, limited-English-proficient

parents, and parents of students with disabilities. Parents will be taught how to become better advocates for their children.

- *Training for parents.* There will be training for parents on such topics as leadership skills, making parent-teacher conferences effective, supporting math and literacy skills, facilitating meetings, and developing and implementing the whole-school improvement plan. Each school will offer classes to increase parents' skills (GED and ESL classes and classes in financial literacy, effective parenting, etc.).
- *A welcoming, nonthreatening, nonconfrontational environment.* Parents will be embraced as a resource for strengthening the school, rather than as a problem that needs to be dealt with. Parents will be involved in the school in many ways, including reaching out to other parents through phone calls and e-mail; attending parent support groups; participating in parent-teacher conferences; chaperoning field trips; putting together parent newsletters; participating in trainings and workshops; assisting in classrooms; organizing fundraisers; participating in school governance; and attending such school activities as athletic events, open houses, and potluck dinners.
- *An active School Parent Council and a fully functioning School Site Council.* Parents will elect the executive committee of the parent council and the parent representatives on the School Site Council; they will not be selected by the school principal, as they sometimes now are. Staff from the office of family and community engagement will provide support, training, and technical assistance to School Parent Councils and School Site Councils, especially on understanding school budgets and strengthening personnel

subcommittees. School staff will support the councils, to mutual benefit.

- *Partnerships with community and faith-based organizations, colleges and universities, local businesses, and social service agencies.* These partnerships will allow schools to garner additional resources, both financial and hands-on. Each school will be a comprehensive, full-service resource for families connecting parents to the supports that are necessary to build strong families.

Recommendations for Change

Family engagement and community mobilization are key factors in promoting reform. The school department and the family engagement system must work with others to develop an informed parent and community constituency committed to advocating for school-based and systemic improvements that offer all children the opportunity to learn at high levels.

- *School-based Approach:* Meaningful parent involvement that impacts student learning happens at the school level. The number of FCOCs must be increased each year until there is school-based family engagement staff in each school. The new superintendent should develop a strategy for implementing fully funded and staffed family centers in each school by school year 2010.
- *Infrastructure and Staffing:* Although school-based family engagement staff report directly to the school principal, they must also be responsible to the larger family engagement system. This system must be led by a strong deputy superintendent with a clear vision for strengthening family and community engagement. There needs to be a strong

The family engagement system must work with others to develop an informed parent and community constituency committed to advocating for school-based and systemic improvements that offer all children the opportunity to learn at high levels.

middle management team with adequate staffing to provide support and technical assistance to school-based staff. There must also be staff dedicated to supporting parents of children with disabilities and limited-English-proficient families.

The new superintendent must ensure that family engagement objectives are being met by the OFCE. The superintendent should reorganize current FCE staffing and infrastructure to support a school-based system. Specifically, what is the middle level structure and how does, and how should, it relate to school-based staff? Should a restructured FCE system be organized by triad? How does the system overcome its “silos”? How does, and how should, the OFCE relate to other departments in the system, such as teaching and learning, and to the deputies who supervise schools?

- **Professional Development:** Family engagement staff, principals, teachers, and other school personnel must be trained in how to develop respectful strategies for working with families. Professional development should not be limited to internal BPS trainings and should take advantage of trainings offered by partnering organizations.
- **Training for Parents:** BPS must build the capacity of parents to support their children’s learning through trainings and workshops that

run the gamut from effective parent-teacher conferences, school budget, personnel sub-committee, supporting students literacy and math skills, to how to help develop and implement whole-school improvement plans.

- **Improved Home-School Communication Systems:** Many parents are unaware of available services and supports and do not have sufficient knowledge of school and district policies. Parents and advocates have complained about the lack of information regarding MCAS prep support, advanced-work placement, new



The new superintendent must support advocacy both inside and outside the system.

residency requirements, the bilingual waiver process, special education rights, etc. Parents often don't even know their child is in danger of failing a class until much too late. Systems need to be created to ensure that parents are equipped to make informed decisions about their children's education and that they receive information on supports and services.

Special attention needs to be paid to non-English-speaking parents and new immigrant communities. There is a growing demand for better translation and interpreter services. The next superintendent must increase OFCE's capacity to work with and better serve limited-English-proficient families.

- **Training for School Site Councils:** All members of School Site Councils must receive training in developing and implementing whole-school improvement plans, school budgets, and hiring.
- **Partnerships with External Parent Groups and Community Organizations:** BPS must fully grasp the importance of collaborating with community-based organizations and regard strong parent and community constituencies as assets. The new superintendent should view the participation of external parent and community groups as a strategy for improving schools.

- **Evaluation:** Principals must work with FCE staff, parents, and the community to develop family engagement plans for their schools, and clear outcome measures for evaluating principals must be developed and used.

The entire family engagement system needs to be assessed, from performance measures for staff, to the FCE infrastructure, to the effectiveness of family engagement programs.

The new superintendent should develop an accountability system that includes mechanisms for receiving feedback from parents, the community, and a variety of independent sources both outside and inside the system.

- **Advocacy:** The new superintendent must support advocacy both inside and outside the system. Advocacy helps parents know their rights and navigate the school system. FCE staff should advocate for parents and the community, and parents and the community should advocate for improvements in the system.

For more information, please contact:

Hubie Jones
Chair, Citizen Commission on Academic Success for Boston Children
Dean *Emeritus*, Boston University School of Social Work
Social Justice Entrepreneur in Residence, City Year
285 Columbus Avenue
Boston, MA 02116
(617) 927-2414
hjones@cityyear.org

John Mudd
Senior Project Director, Boston School Reform Project
25 Kingston Street, 2nd floor
Boston, MA 02111
(617) 357-8431 x221
jmudd@massadvocates.org

Copies of this report may be downloaded from <http://www.massadvocates.org>