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ABSTRACT

Often, parents walk into their children's schools and feel as if they don't have a place to "hang their hats." This guide argues that districts should establish a school family center as a focus of activity and learning for parents, school supporters, and children. The goal of the family center is to provide an avenue for participation in schools, thereby strengthening them. The guide begins with a definition of family centers and their purpose, and describes six focuses of family-community partnerships, including parenting skill development, communication between school and home, volunteerism, learning at home, decision making and advocacy, and community outreach. The guide continues with descriptions of the family center environment and the advantages of a family center. It suggests a committee development approach and provides ideas on specific tasks the committee should undertake, including choosing a location, funding options, equipment requirements, and staffing issues. The guide also addresses types of activities to offer and ways to maintain interest and participation in the center. The guide ends by covering how the family center should be evaluated, handling common problems, and key characteristics of successful family centers. Eight appendixes provide information on resources, partnership frameworks, family-school communication, parental participation, employer participation, creating a welcoming atmosphere, what families want to know, and family involvement.
(SD)

Organizing a Successful Family Center in Your School

ED 402 053

PS 024823

guardian
specialist
volunteer
brother
specialist
staff

spouse
sister
families

A family center is a place where everybody belongs.

siblings
educator
specialist

educator
specialist

specialist
grandparent

administrator
teacher
sports
administrator
volunteer
family

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A Resource



Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction

Organizing a Successful Family Center in Your School

A Resource Guide

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Community Learning**



**Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction
Madison, Wisconsin**

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Preface

by John T. Benson, State Superintendent of Public Instruction



How often do parents walk into their children's schools and feel as if, somehow, they aren't supposed to be there? Or, if they are there to help do something for their children's teachers, how often do they carry their coat and bag around with them because there is nowhere to put them?

Schools are for parents, too! Parents belong in schools just as much as their children do! There is no better way to say this to parents than to have a family center in your school building—a place for parents to hang their hats; a place for parents to call their own; a place that allows families to feel like “insiders,” not outsiders.

The family center doesn't have to be a fancy place. It doesn't have to have expensive equipment or room for

300 people. But, it does have to be an inviting place that people feel welcome to visit and use. It needs the lights on, the coffee maker on, and, most importantly, someone friendly and smiling to welcome everyone.

Many schools have some type of family center already up and running. That's wonderful! But, is the space welcoming to *all* families, especially those who might not ordinarily be there? Are the so-called "hard-to-reach families" *really* hard to reach? Or are they only waiting-to-be-reached families who are waiting to feel useful, waiting to feel respected, and waiting to somehow find a meaningful role to play in their child's learning? Let's make it an *All-Family Center*!

Yes, there are obstacles to creating and maintaining a family center. The most common obstacles are lack of space, money, and people to staff the center.

You may think that you don't have what you need. However, after meeting with your school-community council—or starting your own council of parents, principal, teachers, and community representatives—some of you will find that you are well on your way. Here are a few suggestions to getting past the obstacles.

"We have no space." One Pulaski elementary school renovated an old maintenance closet, put down some donated carpeting, and added a sofa someone no longer needed and a coffee maker. The principal donated his collection of education books and started a school family center. Of course you have space!

"We have no money." Again, use your imagination here. Let your families and your community know about your needs. Local businesses and service groups look for good ideas to fund and support. Don't do it all

yourself. Let them help you—that's the first step to a successful family center!

"We have no one to run it." Some schools use federal Title I funds to pay for a family center coordinator. Some use school volunteers. Some put a phone in their center and encourage teachers to spend preparation time there, make calls to families, or meet with parents.

Promote your family center any way you can and be flexible rather than exact in its uses.

- Kagel Elementary School in Milwaukee lets parents looking for jobs use the phone in the family center to inquire about employment. The school also encourages its non-English-speaking parents to bring in any school or government documents for help with translation.
- West De Pere Middle School found that few people were using its out-of-the-way family center, so they switched it to a room right next to the school office, and families suddenly discovered it was there.

By conducting open houses, workshops for families, and PTA meetings in the family center, you are promoting the center. A family center newsletter or an information sheet also help promote the center. A family center is a place where activities and relationships happen.

Above all, *hang in there!* Samuel Johnson said, "Great works are performed not by strength, but by perseverance." It takes time, energy, love, and patience to discover families' needs and have a well-used family center.

How our schools say "Welcome!" sets the tone for education in our communities. Wouldn't it be wonder-

ful if every school building in the state of Wisconsin had a place that parents could call their own?

I hope this booklet helps you start a center or improve an existing center in your school. Simply following the plan can result in the physical space being established, but actually putting your enthusiasm and commitment into welcoming families and other community members will make the center a place where good things happen. You will send the clear message that families are, indeed, an important part of the fabric of your school.

Message of Support

from the State Superintendent's Parent Advisory Council

The purpose of the State Superintendent's Parent Advisory Council is to advise the state superintendent on behalf of parents regarding educational issues, policies, and new programs that affect children and to promote parent-community-school partnerships that enhance the education of all learners.

The State Superintendent's Parent Advisory Council has made the establishment of family centers in schools one of its priorities. We encourage every school to establish a center that enables families and other community members to participate in their schools.

We commend the state superintendent for promoting school family centers and for making this publication available to schools. As advocates of parent-community-school partnerships that enhance the education of all learners, we believe school family centers can work to make the school a more welcoming and friendly place for families.

We encourage all schools to consider the benefits of establishing a school family center as a center of activity and learning for parents and other school partners. This guide provides an excellent starting point from which each school community can establish a center reflecting its unique needs and personality.

The State Superintendent's Parent Advisory Council:

- Barb Babcock, Madison**
- Penny Burrall, Cedarburg**
- Walter Camp, St. Germain**
- Mike Clayton, Oregon**
- Susan Dolloff, Eau Claire**
- Natalie Doney, Eau Claire**
- Mary Glass, Milwaukee**
- Bama Grice, Milwaukee**
- Janice Hahn, Glendale**
- Laura Haig, Wauwatosa**
- Janet Kassel, Janesville**
- Mark Smits, Green Bay**
- Jeannie Wanless, Wisconsin Dells**
- Susan Wollner, Madison**



*The presence of parents can transform
the culture of a school.*

— Sarah Lawrence Lightfoot
Author of *The Good High School:
Portraits of Character and Education*

What Is the Purpose of this Booklet?

This booklet was developed to help school staff members, parents, and community leaders understand how family centers can promote family participation and strengthen their schools. It also serves as a guide to establishing family centers.

The term *family center* is used throughout this booklet. However, the name actually used at a particular school depends upon what fits best for the school. A successful family center allows families to feel a sense of ownership in the schools, to feel like insiders. The family center permits school staff members and families to establish relationships, programs, and activities to help children succeed academically, emotionally, and socially. To achieve that success, parents and other community members interested in the schools must be involved with the establishment of the center. The term *parent* refers to any caregiver who assumes responsibility for nurturing and caring for children.

How the center is established and maintained can tell a great deal about how families, schools, and communities work together to promote student learning. The Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction (DPI) recommends that schools support parents and other family

members by enabling them to act in the key roles of teachers, supporters, advocates, and decision makers in their children's learning. The DPI encourages school staff members to develop and nurture family-school-community partnerships through its framework for participation, which is based on the research of Joyce Epstein, co-director of the Center on Families, Communities, Schools and Children's Learning. The framework outlines six types of family-community partnerships with the schools (see appendix B).

Parenting. Build on parenting strengths and help families improve parenting skills. Facilitate support systems and networks to enable families to effectively nurture their children.

Communicating. Promote clear, two-way communication between schools and families regarding school programs and children's progress. Communication should reach families both individually and collectively. Communication practices should ensure that families and school staff members communicate back and forth about their children.

Volunteering. Recruit and organize volunteer participation from families and other community members. A wide range of volunteer assignments should be available at different times and locations. Volunteers should have a clear understanding of their roles.

Learning at Home. Provide for families and school staff members to work together to establish learning goals and to come up with strategies and techniques designed to help children reinforce their learning at home

and in the community to reach high levels of academic achievement.

Decision Making and Advocacy. Enable parents to participate in making decisions and advocating for their children's education. Families should have opportunities to give their opinions and participate in decision making about school programs. The school staff members should support parents as decision makers and partners in the education of their children. Working together, school staff members and families can build on each other's strengths and develop leadership skills.

Community Outreach. Establish partnerships with individuals and organizations in the community. Provide parents with linkages and help them develop the skills they will need to access school and community support services that strengthen school programs, family practices, and students' learning and development.

The family center can play a role in enhancing all six types of partnerships. It can be the center for the school's partnership efforts while at the same time offering a friendly place for family members to touch base with their school.

What better place to serve as the center of the school's partnership efforts than the family center? It can send a strong message to families that they are an important part of the fabric of this school.

In Chelsea, Massachusetts, where Boston University is undertaking one of the most ambitious and comprehensive educational improvement projects in the nation, the establishment of parent rooms is one of several initiatives that link the home with the school system. In

the ten-year Boston University/Chelsea Partnership, each school has also developed school leadership councils, which offer extensive opportunities for parental involvement in the life of the school, including the opportunity to participate in screening candidates for teaching positions. At the high school, parents participate in a program designed to reduce truancy and dropout problems.



What Is a Family Center?

A family center:

- provides parents with a room or space for their own use at the school (or district) and facilitates communication between families and the school;
- provides opportunities for parents to get to know each other and network;
- offers educational and socializing opportunities; and
- serves various needs of families so that parents and other adults can turn their attention to helping and supporting their children.

The ideal is to have a family center in every school building. Above all, family centers serve to make parents feel welcome in their children's school.

Vivian Johnson, education professor at Boston University and author of "Parent Centers in Urban Schools: Four Case Studies," says that successful centers strengthen school-family relationships, and that in turn results in improved learning for children.

What Are the Advantages of a Family Center?

A well-designed center will:

- make the school an accessible, safe, and friendly place for parents to gather.
- improve communication among families and between home and school.
- promote greater multicultural understanding among the school's families.
- demonstrate tangibly that parents are welcome at the school.
- serve as a hub for promoting parent education by linking with community resources and carrying out a wide range of home-school partnership activities that enhance students' learning.
- serve as the center for partnerships.
- help develop leadership and advocacy skills and opportunities for parents.
- coordinate parent and community volunteer services that are available to teachers and the school.

Key Point

Everyone, including families, school staff members, and the community, should experience the benefits offered by the family center.

Who Should Participate in Establishing a Family Center?

The initiative to set up the committee can come from the community or the school. To ensure success, those who take the initiative need to involve a cross section of the school and community, with parents having a key role.

The center has to be seen as belonging to the parents, including those parents who have not felt comfortable in the school. A steering committee should be representative of those who will use and benefit from the center. Leadership may come from the parent-teacher organization, the school site council, the district community education council, or the family-school-community partnership action team. "A Tool for Improvement: Parent Action Research," a 15-minute video from the League of Schools Reaching Out (also available for loan from the DPI), is a good starting point.

The committee should consider involving or seeking input from

- parents and other family members representing the community's cultural and racial diversity;
- teachers;
- principals, assistant principals, or other administrative staff;
- pupil services staff members;
- other school staff members, especially the custodian, secretaries, and counselors;

- government and agency representatives;
- business and community leaders;
- representatives of the religious community;
- family centers that are already in the community and agencies that provide parenting information and classes;
- the library staff;
- students; and
- senior citizens.

Key Point

As many different parent, school, and community perspectives as possible should be involved from the start to engender a sense of common ownership.



What Are the Tasks of the Steering Committee?

Establish the Center

- Decide on its purpose and goals.
- Conduct a needs assessment. (Note: The perspectives of the community, teachers, parents, and students, especially secondary students, are important.)
- Locate a site.
- Identify staffing and funding resources.

Coordinate Center Activities

- Use data from the needs assessment to establish a budget and plan activities.
- Find ways to link the center's activities with the school's and community's other goals, events, and resources.
- Serve as an ongoing advisory board to center staff.
- Publicize the center's activities and accomplishments to garner sustained support.
- Identify strategies for fund-raising to support center activities.

Evaluate Center Activities and Accomplishments

- Evaluate accomplishment of goals and effectiveness of center activities.
- Ensure responsiveness to all segments of the parent group.

Key Point

A timeline should be set, tasks and responsibilities should be assigned, and momentum should be maintained.

Where Should the Family Center Be Located?

Once the school or school district is committed to establishing a family center and has determined its primary purpose, the next task is to select the site. Ideally, the family center should be located in a central, easy-to-reach location in the school building, for example, an empty classroom or office near the school office.

Every attempt should be made to secure such a room. However, because many schools are overcrowded and lack extra space, the committee may decide that its better to start with a less-than-ideal space. In that case, the committee might consider the following (remember, what may work in one school may not work in another):

- a corner of the library, cafeteria, or gymnasium.
- an office adjacent to a classroom or next to the principal's office.
- a supply room.

A central location for the family center on the school site (such as close to the principal's office, library, or cafeteria) will send a strong message that the center is an important part of the school. If a central location is not possible and the center must be located on the edge of the school facility, it is important to post prominent directional signs leading to the center. If space cannot be found on the school campus, a location in a nearby public facility is better than no space at all (Johnson, 1992). No matter where the center is located, convenient parking spaces should be reserved for visitors.

If the family center will serve more than one school, a larger facility may be necessary. For example, one school district chose an abandoned school. Because of the ample space available, each room in the center serves a different function: an instructional room for workshops; a production room for making games and preparing learning activities to take home; a library and book-exchange room; a filmstrip and video center; a learning-games center; a toy-exchange room; a child-care room; a carpentry center; and storage areas.

Ample space is ideal but may not be available to many schools and school districts. Rather than not have a center, the steering committee can come up with an interim location. Some schools may also find that the space they thought was perfect does not work well, and another space has to be found that better meets their needs.

Key Point

Wherever the family center is located, it must be perceived as an accessible and safe place to go. The center should offer a welcoming and friendly atmosphere where parents can relax, visit with one another and with staff members, and obtain help and services that will meet their families' needs.

How Can the Family Center Be Funded?

A variety of funding sources can be tapped to cover operating costs. Check out possible federal and state sources. A good contact is the state Department of Public Instruction. While funds may not be specifically available for family centers, related funds may be used to get something started. School or school district discretionary funds may also be available.

Other sources of funding and support include grants from foundations or charitable organizations; fund-raisers by local community members and school staff members; and contributions from businesses, service clubs, and community groups. Funds from different sources can add up quickly.

When planning a budget, consider nonmonetary contributions, such as books, supplies, learning materials, food, equipment, and facilities as well as volunteer time from parents, teachers, social service agency staff, and business and other community members.

Key Point

A family center does not need a large budget to get started. What is more important is a firm commitment to the idea and a willingness to explore all possible sources of support.

How Should the Family Center Be Equipped?

After selecting the location of the family center, the next step is obtaining furnishings. The size of the center's space, the purposes and activities of the center, and the resources available will determine the equipment, furniture, and materials needed.

Donations are likely to play a key role. Make a wish list and share it with parents, social clubs, churches, and businesses. You may be surprised at the usability of the items some people have in their attics and are willing to donate. You may want to start with basic equipment and supplies:

- sofa, adult- and child-sized chairs, tables, and desks
- bookcases, file cabinets, and storage cupboards
- coffeepot, teapot, and ample supplies of coffee and tea
- popcorn popper
- telephone and answering machine or voice mail
- library with books that reflect the parents' languages and cultures
- supplies for making learning games
- newspapers and magazines
- supplies for children (for example, games, puzzles, and toys)
- brochures about the family center and other community resources
- typewriters and computers

As the center grows and becomes better established, additional equipment may be acquired. Examples include the following:

- computers for home use or for computer classes for adults
- refrigerator and microwave oven
- recycling box for clothing, shoes, and household items
- food closet
- television, VCR, and video library
- toy-lending library
- dictionaries, pencils, and other school supplies to give to students in need
- partitions to ensure privacy for counseling areas
- additional telephones
- cassette recorders and tapes, and a camcorder
- laminating machine
- copy machine
- building and gardening supplies
- bus passes

Key Point

Participants should be given primary responsibility for decorating, furnishing, and supplying the family center. Involvement in those aspects will lead participants to take pride in the center and feel at home there.

Who Should Staff the Family Center?

The center staff, whether volunteer or paid, will be the heartbeat of your family center. The parent who comes to a cold, dark, empty room will feel much different than the parent greeted by a warm smile and a pot of coffee.

Employees or volunteers can staff the family center. The school or district may have employees who can serve as family center staff. For example, community liaisons or assistants, whose positions may be funded to promote family involvement, are possible choices. Whether or not the staff is paid, roles and responsibilities should be clearly identified.

The most important task is to coordinate center activities, publicity, and outreach to families. Because center staff serve to create a link between the school and the community, the coordinator(s) must be knowledgeable regarding school and community functions and must hold the respect of families and school staff members. If the center serves a culturally diverse group, consider having multiple coordinators who reflect that diversity and can communicate in the parents' own languages. If funds are not sufficient to pay more than one coordinator, recruit lead volunteers who are representative of the community to assist the coordinator (see the DPI's *Volunteer Resource Guide*, 1995).

Depending upon your school's need, staff responsibilities may include the following:

Planning

- Arrange for the center to be open and accessible at the minimum whenever the school is open.
- Meet regularly with parents and the advisory committee to plan and coordinate center activities.
- Order, collect, and organize supplies, equipment, and parent resources (such as clothing, food, learning materials, games, and toys that reflect the needs and diversity of the community).
- Meet with agency representatives to facilitate inter-agency collaboration and referral services.
- Provide interpreters and translators.
- Organize child care and transportation.
- Assess the needs of parents and school staff members on a regular basis.

Implementing

- Recruit, train, and supervise volunteers for the center and for school activities.
- Coordinate fund-raising and other financial support for the center.
- Help facilitate communication between school staff members and families.
- Publicize center activities to parents, school staff members, and the community at large.
- Arrange for parent-student-teacher meetings.
- Interpret and translate workshops and materials into the languages needed by the parents, enabling them to participate fully in center activities.
- Recruit adult educators, teachers, and speakers for classes and workshops.
- Represent the center at meetings of the faculty and other school governance groups.

Evaluating

- Keep records of center activities and a roster of participants.
- Ensure that all families can participate and feel welcome.
- Recognize and reward parents, teachers, and the community for their participation and contributions.
- Help in the evaluation of each activity's effectiveness.

Linking with colleges and universities, adult education centers, community agencies, and businesses can create opportunities to expand the center's staff. Adult education centers will often pay for a teacher to conduct a GED program or English-as-a-second-language (ESL) classes if class space is provided by the school and 20 to 25 participants can be recruited. Social service agencies may provide counseling services if space at the family center is designated for those services. Business and other community organizations may provide volunteers or speakers for workshops. And if parents and other family members are asked specifically, they will often reveal special skills they can contribute.

Key Point

The successful functioning of a family center depends on the selection and training of effective staff and the support and encouragement of the administration. The roles and responsibilities of the staff, whether paid or unpaid, aren't the same in each school, but depend upon the unique needs and personality of the school.

What Kinds of Activities Should the Family Center Plan?



The best way to begin planning events and activities is to survey parents and school staff members to identify the kinds of activities that should be given priority during the family center's early stages. As the center becomes more firmly established, however, the imagination and creativity of its participants will help bring the center to its full potential.

Start with activities that have the highest priority and that support schoolwide goals and objectives. Carry out a few of those activities after planning them carefully. With that approach the center will start out on a sound basis and will build the support that will be necessary for long-term success.

Initially, participation may be low. Do not become discouraged. It will take time and continued effort to inform parents and families about the center and draw them to its activities. Because teachers will play a key role in recruiting parents and referring them to the center, they should be apprised of the center's progress and planned activities well before the center opens. If possible, plan a kickoff event that will attract a crowd to the center's first activity.

Some activities to consider are:

- conducting parent and family workshops that are linked to school goals, such as help with homework, family reading, math, science, and art.
- organizing special make-it-and-take-it sessions to create learning materials for use at home.
- offering adult education programs, such as adult literacy, ESL or GED classes, computer/word-processing classes, financial planning, and consumer education.
- organizing parenting classes that are gender-neutral and appropriate to participants' ages and cultural backgrounds; positive parenting or parent effectiveness training; child abuse prevention; and alcohol and other drug abuse prevention.
- planning cultural and social activities.
- planning family sport activities (such as softball and volleyball).
- developing a lending library of resources for parents.
- developing a toy-lending library.
- providing tutorial classes that parents and students attend together.
- facilitating parent-teacher conferences.
- referring participants to appropriate community agencies.
- training classroom, school, and center volunteers.
- reaching out to families through telephone trees, home visits, and publications (such as a family center newsletter).
- establishing information and homework hotlines.

- training parents in methods of observing classrooms and supporting classroom observations.
- training members of school-site councils and other advisory or decision-making groups in the functions of their roles.
- having teachers spend some planning time in the center on a weekly or monthly basis.

Key Point

Families and school staff members will support the center if the activities meet parents' needs and if teachers perceive that the center is enhancing children's learning.



How Can the Family Center Maintain Interest and Expand Participation?

Once a center has been established, strategies should be developed for maintaining interest and extending the center's outreach efforts. At the beginning of the school year, remind the faculty of the center's services and encourage teachers to help expand participation. For example, during parent-teacher conferences, teachers can refer parents to the center to obtain recommended materials for helping their children (Buckley, et al., 1991).

The following are other strategies to maintain interest and expand participation.

Publicity

- Publishing, in appropriate languages, a calendar of upcoming events and following up with fliers and announcements.
- Maintaining telephone trees conducted in the languages needed to serve all families.
- Using newsletters and other publicity tools that cover events and feature the work of parents and children.
- Sharing parents' testimonials about the center's activities and the benefits of participating.
- Contacting local television reporters, radio reporters, and newspapers about activities and events.
- Including the family center on the tour for back-to-school night.

Recognizing, Celebrating

- Give awards, prizes, and recognition for participating and contributing.
- Schedule social events and celebrations as well as workshops and classes.
- Make available interpreters and materials in families' own languages.
- Arrange for child care and transportation.
- Provide wide-ranging resources that meet families' needs, such as food, clothing, household items, job searches, counseling, medical services, and so forth.

Shared Ownership

- Offer workshops, programs, and services that parents want, that parents are given a voice in organizing and conducting, and that respond to families' special needs.
- Visit homes to share information about the center with families that may be reluctant to come to the center.
- Involve children in programs.
- Feature productive activities that show parents how they are contributing to their children's learning and to the quality of school life.

Key Point

Success in reaching out and involving all families requires the center to be a caring and inviting place that meets families' needs.

How Should the Family Center Be Evaluated?

Evaluating the family center's effectiveness is an important component of the center's operation from the beginning. Evaluation data can play a critical role in sustaining both financial and human support for the center. During the initial planning phase, work with a school district or government program evaluator to establish good record-keeping systems. Data collection need not be an onerous task when record-keeping systems are established from the start.

Measures can be taken before, during, or after to strengthen the impact of the center's activities. For example, if the center conducts a series of workshops for parents on how to help their children with homework, the workshops' effectiveness can be evaluated while the series is still in progress. This task is done by collecting data on homework grades and the rate of homework return for children whose parents attend the workshops. That information will indicate whether the series is meeting its objectives. Using the data to improve the series while it is still in progress will allow current participants to benefit from the improvements.

The following data can be valuable.

Levels of Participation

- Number of participants using the center.
- Number of parents enrolled in classes (parenting workshops as well as adult education classes).
- Regularity of participants' attendance in classes.

- Number of volunteers.
- Number of parent contacts made via telephone or home visits.
- Number of requests for services.
- Number of referrals to the center by teachers, counselors, administrators, and community organizations.
- Oral and written comments from participants, school staff members, and the community.

Information about Activities

- Written evaluations of all classes, workshops, and activities.
- Observations of center activities by parents, school personnel, and school district personnel.
- Documentation of the number and diversity of activities, including photographs and videos.
- Records of the use of particular resources, such as the clothing box, the lending library, and the make-it-and-take-it corner.
- Before-and-after assessments of children's learning resulting from specific kinds of activities and workshops, such as family mathematics or family reading.
- Copies of newspaper articles and records of visual media coverage.

Information about Participants and their Perceptions

- Do parents and other family members feel comfortable and welcome at the center?
- Do all racial and cultural groups feel equally welcome and comfortable?

- How do male and female participation compare (numbers and extent of participation)?
- Has participating in center activities helped parents support their children's learning?
- Have center activities facilitated parents' learning about the school's functions or other topics of interest to parents?
- Are center activities meeting parents' needs?
- Are outreach efforts drawing more families to center activities?
- Are teachers well informed about center activities? Do they participate and refer parents to the center for help?
- Are center activities enhancing students' learning?
- Is the publicity for center activities adequate and timely?
- Is the center helping to increase parent involvement in other aspects of school life (for example, serving as classroom volunteers, attending open house and parent-teacher conferences, participating in school-site councils, or serving on advisory committees)?
- Are appropriate materials and supplies available? Are they used?
- Is the center linking parents and families with other community agencies and resources?

Key Point

From the beginning, clear objectives should be set and evaluation should be planned.

How Can Barriers and Other Problems be Handled?

Commitment and perseverance will be needed to overcome the barriers and other problems that are likely to arise. Strategies that may help overcome problems include:

- plan big but start small. Be sure that the first activities can be completed successfully to ensure that the center will gain an excellent reputation from the start.
- break down complex tasks and projects into small pieces and involve as many people as possible in carrying them out.
- build support by sharing small successes and accomplishments.
- inform all parties of problems as well as successes.
- thank and give credit to others for the success of the center.
- do not be afraid to ask for help.
- target specific activities and programs. Do not try to reach everyone at one time.
- visit other family centers to see how they work.
- publicize center events even more than you think is necessary. There can never be too many notices, phone calls, or messages about center activities.
- ask parents and school staff members for feedback regularly (formally and informally). Listen and respond to what they say.

- insist on training for center staff and parent volunteers to prepare them well for their roles as managers and coordinators of center activities.
- document center activities on videotape; it is an exciting way to “tell the story” and carry the message into families’ homes.
- involve children in center activities. Families will come when their children are a part of the action.
- focus at first on activities that will help parents support their children’s learning. Surveys indicate that such activities are what parents are most interested in doing.
- be sure to provide materials and programs in the languages parents can understand.
- address conflicts and controversies as they arise. Get help from community mediation services if necessary. Identify common goals and needs and work from there to find solutions.
- expand and revitalize the membership of the steering committee to maintain a high level of commitment. Invite potential sponsors to join the committee.
- share the problems and accomplishments of the center regularly with parents, the school faculty, and the community. Ask for their ideas and suggestions.
- make frequent evaluations to become aware of the center’s strengths and weaknesses.
- have fun and celebrate accomplishments.

Key Points for a Successful Family Center

The following key points summarize the factors essential to organizing and maintaining successful family centers.

- Everyone, including families, school staff members, and the community, should experience the benefits offered by the family center.
- As many different parent, school, and community perspectives as possible should be involved from the start to engender a sense of common ownership.
- A timeline should be set, tasks and responsibilities should be assigned, and momentum should be maintained.
- Wherever the family center is located, it must be perceived as an accessible and safe place to go. The center should offer a welcoming and friendly atmosphere where parents can relax, visit with one another and with staff members, and obtain help and services that will meet their families' needs.
- A family center does not need a large budget to get started. What is more important is a firm commitment to the idea and a willingness to explore all possible sources of support.
- Participants should be given primary responsibility for decorating, furnishing, and supplying the family center. Involvement in those aspects will lead participants to take pride in the center and feel at home there.

- The successful functioning of a family center depends on the selection and training of effective staff and the support and encouragement of the administration.
- Families and school staff members will support the center if the activities meet parents' needs and if teachers perceive that the center is enhancing children's learning.
- Success in reaching out and involving all families requires the center to be a caring and inviting place that meets families' needs.
- From the beginning, clear objectives should be set and evaluation should be planned.



Appendixes

- A. Selected Resources
- B. Partnership Framework
- C. Family-School Communication
- D. National Education Goal 8:
Parental Participation
- E. An Option for Every Employer
- F. Schools that Say "Welcome"
- G. What Families Want to Know
- H. Family Involvement: Reconnecting
Schools and Communities

Appendix A

Selected Resources

Printed Materials

Buckley, M., M. Mayo, and J.H. Sturdivant. *The Parent Center: Success in Natchez*. Natchez, MS: Natchez-Adams County School District, 1991.

Epstein, Joyce. "School/Family/Community Partnerships." *Phi Delta Kappan* May 1995, pp. 701-12.

Holloway, M.A. *Building an Early Childhood Parent-Teacher Resource Center: Project Enlightenment*. Raleigh, NC: Wake County Public School System, 1991.

Johnson, V.R. "Family Centers." Working paper of the Schools Reaching Out Project. Boston: Institute for Responsive Education, 1992.

_____. *Parent/Family Centers in Schools: Expanding Outreach and Promoting Collaboration*. Report of the Schools Reaching Out Project. Boston: Institute for Responsive Education, 1993.

_____. "The Role of Parent Centers in Strengthening Family/School Relations." Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association. Atlanta, 1993.

Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction. *Families and Education: An Educator's Resource for Family Involvement*. Madison: DPI, 1993.

_____. *Family-School-Community Partnership Resource Packets*. Madison: DPI, 1987-current.

_____. *School Volunteer Resource Guide*. Madison: DPI, 1996.

Suggested Reading

Berla, Nancy, Jocelyn Garlington, and Anne T.

Henderson. *Taking Stock: The Inventory of Family, Community and School Support for Student Achievement*. Available from National Committee for Citizens in Education, 900 2nd St., N.E., Ste. 8, Washington, DC 20002-3557; (202) 408-0447.

Davies, Don. "Linking Family-Community-School Partnerships to School Reform." 27 May 1994.

North Central Regional Educational Laboratory. "Wisconsin: New Directions for Promoting Family-Community-School Partnerships Through State Policy." *Policy Seminars* May 1995. (NCREL, 1900 Spring Rd., Ste. 300, Oak Brook, IL 60521; (708) 571-4700. Also available from the DPI, contact Jane Grinde.)

"Parent-Teacher Action Research in Profile." *Equity and Choice* (Corwin Press, Inc.) 10.1 (Fall 1993), pp. 21-35.

Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction. *Family-Community Partnership with the Schools: Framework for Participation*. Madison: DPI, 1995.

Videos

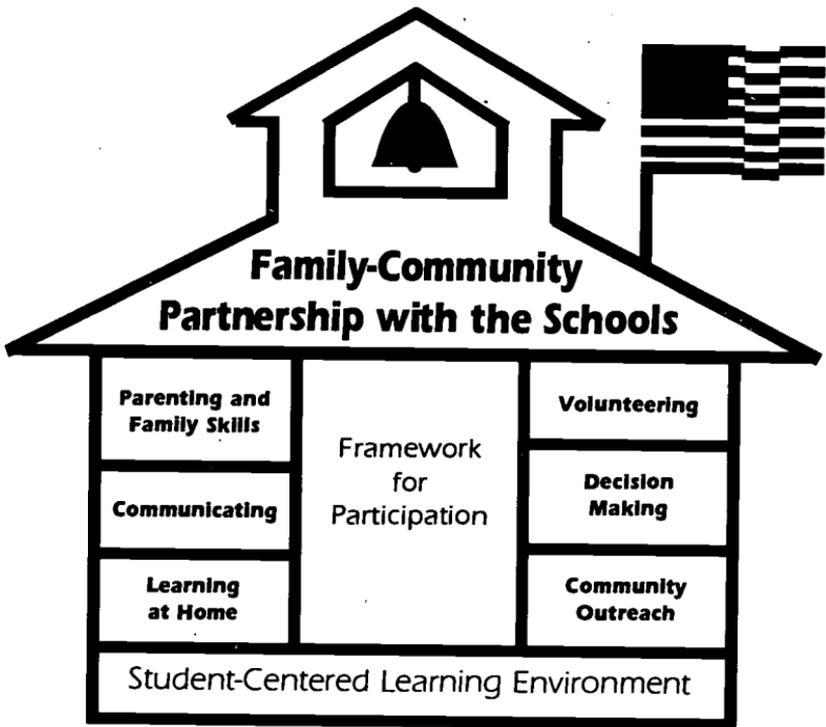
Building Community: How to Start a Family Center in Your School. VHS, 20 minutes. \$15. Order from the Institute for Responsive Education, Publications Dept., 605 Commonwealth Ave., Boston, MA 02215; (617) 353-3309.

Parent Center in Action: Centennial High School. VHS, 20 minutes. Order from Curtis Clark, Program Production Manager, Compton Unified School District, Media Resource Library, 603 S. Acacia Ave., Compton, CA 90220; (310) 639-4321, ext. 5565. Send two blank tapes. One will be returned with a copy of the video.

A Tool for Improvement: Parent Action Research. VHS, 15 minutes. Produced by the League of Schools Reaching Out, Institute for Responsive Education, 605 Commonwealth Ave., Boston, MA 02215.

Appendix B

Partnership Framework



Six Types of Family-Community Participation

Parenting. Build on parenting strengths and help families improve parenting skills. Facilitate support systems and networks to enable families to effectively nurture their children.

Communicating. Design and implement effective two-way communication practices to reach families, both individually and collectively. These practices should ensure that families and school staff members communicate back and forth about their children.

Learning at Home. Provide for families and school staff members to work together in developing learning goals and offering opportunities for learning activities at home and in the community to meet the goals.

Volunteering. Recruit and organize volunteer participation from families and the community at large.

Decision Making. Design governance structure through which parents are partners in policy decisions so that families have opportunities to give their opinions and to participate in decision making about school programs. Recruit families to act as advocates and decision makers and represent other parents and families.

Community Outreach. Establish partnerships with individuals and organizations in the community.

Getting It Done

Leadership. Who is in charge and has the authority to organize and assign tasks? One person should be accountable for the results.

Analysis. What are the needs and challenges? What results do you want? Develop a basis for your efforts.

Planning and Policy Development. What must be done? How? Who will do it? What is the timeline? School board policy and district and school procedures may need to be developed.

Action/Implementation. With the groundwork laid, how much of the plan can you put in place? While the six types of family-community participation for schools are interrelated and important for a comprehensive approach, determine what is possible and practical at any given time. Don't delay doing something because the whole plan is not in place.

Evaluation. What worked? What didn't? What needs changing or fine tuning? Listen and learn from experiences.

Based on the research of Joyce Epstein, co-director, Center on Families, Communities, Schools, and Children's Learning, Johns Hopkins University. Implementation through the League of Schools Reaching Out, Institute for Responsive Education, Boston.

Appendix C

Family-School Communication

Research and practice show that successful communications are most likely to occur when educators work with families and others to identify the most useful content, form, frequency, reading levels, and locations for sharing information. Channels of communication must be designed to flow in all directions. Schools must know which families they are or are not reaching in order to improve their communications with families who cannot come to the school building for meetings or workshops, new families who arrive after the start of the school year, or others with special needs. Public information must be continuously updated and connections renewed. None of these is an easy task. (Joyce Epstein, "Goals 2000, Title I, and School to Work Legislation: Implications for School, Family, and Community Connections," work in progress.)

Use the Family/School/Community Partnership Framework (pp. 35-37) to develop a system for family-school-community participation, with a heavy emphasis on communication. The system is needed to ensure that all groups and individuals within the school and district have an opportunity to participate in the learning community. The following questions should be addressed.

- How are parents involved on a routine basis to be partners with the school regarding their children's learning?

- How does the school reach out to parents to ensure that they are participating in their children's education?
- What communications methods are in place? How are they reaching *all* parents?
- What goals does the school have to make sure parents are aware of the curriculum, have an opportunity to develop a learning plan for their child, and know how the learning plan fits with the learner outcomes of the district?
- How are parents participating in the decision making for the school?
- How are the views of all parents solicited?
- How are members of the governance council representing nonmembers? How is information communicated to the other parents? How do you know the messages are being received?
- What strategies does the school and district have for reaching parents?

Family-School-Community Partnership Team, Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction

Appendix D

National Education Goal 8: Parental Participation

By the year 2000, every school will promote partnerships that will increase parental involvement and participation in promoting the social, emotional, and academic growth of children.



Objectives

- Every state will develop policies to assist local schools and local educational agencies to establish programs for increasing partnerships that respond to the varying needs of parents and the home, including parents of children who are disadvantaged or bilingual, or parents of children with disabilities.
- Every school will actively engage parents and families in a partnership that supports the academic work of children at home and shared educational decision making at school.
- Parents and families will help to ensure that schools are adequately supported and will hold schools and teachers to high standards of accountability.

The Importance and Potential of Family-School-Community Partnerships

Reaching all of the National Education Goals by the year 2000 may seem difficult, yet there is one force that is often unrecognized and underutilized by schools and educators: families. By recognizing the significant role parents have in educating their children and involving them in real and meaningful ways, schools can make significant progress toward reaching the goals and becoming high-performance institutions. Many schools around the country have successfully developed family-school-community partnerships, recognizing that responsibility for children's education lies at home, at school, and in the community. We have seen time and time again that, by working together, parents and teachers can have a dramatic positive impact on student test scores, student attendance rates, student behavior and attitudes toward school, and student graduation rates. The idea of family involvement as a means of achieving the National Education Goals is especially encouraging, because research shows that effective family-school-community partnerships can be established in only three to five years.

There is abundant public support for increased family involvement in the nation's schools.

- Almost one-third of public secondary school teachers in the U.S. believe lack of parental involvement is a serious problem for their schools. Teachers rated strengthening parental involvement in their children's education as the most important educational policy priority in the coming years.

- Four out of ten parents believe that they are not spending as much time as they would like to on their children's education.
- Nearly three-fourths of ten- to 13-year-olds and nearly half of 14- to 17-year-olds reported that they would like to talk to their parents more about school-work.
- Nearly nine out of ten business executives rated lack of parental involvement as the biggest obstacle to school reform.

This interest and enthusiasm for increasing family involvement in education is encouraging. The importance of parental involvement was formally recognized in 1994 when the eighth goal was added to the list of National Education Goals.

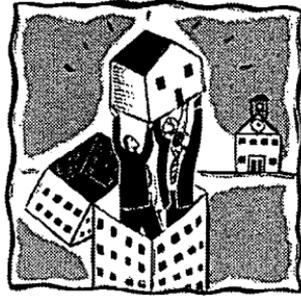
Increasing family involvement in education will not only help achieve this specific parental participation goal but will significantly help efforts to meet the other seven goals as well.

Excerpted from *Executive Summary, The National Education Goals Report, 1995.*

Appendix E

An Option for Every Employer

Everywhere today, home-school-work partnerships are promoting family involvement in the education of children. Among the options, businesses can:



Create and promote policies that make it possible for employees to be involved.

- time off for participation in school and child care activities
- time off for the first day of school
- beginning and end-of-day flextime
- lunch flextime
- work-at-home arrangements
- compressed work week
- part-time work
- job sharing

Support employee parents through worksite programs.

- lunchtime parenting seminars
- parent support groups
- education and parenting newsletters
- family resource libraries
- worksite-based PTA

- literacy training
- national parent-school partnership programs
- parent hotlines

Work to improve child care and schools through internal and community programs.

- on-site or consortium child care or on-site “satellite” schools
- child care resource and referral services
- child care subsidies such as vouchers and discounts
- training, development, and accreditation for community child care providers
- in-kind donations or pro bono consulting to schools and child care
- school-employee partnerships and volunteer programs
- advocacy

Work with schools to help them better meet the needs of employed parents.

- parent volunteer programs
- “employee-friendly” scheduling of school events
- improved parent-teacher communication through newsletters or voice mail
- interpreters for non-English-speaking parents
- translation of parent materials
- family resource centers in the schools

Reprinted from *Employers, Families, and Education: Promoting Family Involvement in Learning. Building Community Partnerships for Learning*. A report by the Families and Work Institute. Commissioned for the Family Involvement Partnerships for Learning. U.S. Dept. of Education, 1995. 1-800-USA-LEARN.

Appendix F

Schools that Say "Welcome"

Directions: Think about the experiences you have had working in your school. Evaluate your school's relationship with families. Read and mark each statement below. Compare and discuss results.

++ = Always

+ = Almost always

✓ = Sometimes

0 = Needs much improvement

1. _____ Office staff greets visitors in a friendly, courteous way.
2. _____ Teachers, staff, and students answer the telephone in a friendly, professional way.
3. _____ A welcome sign and school map are displayed near the entrance.
4. _____ There is an area where visitors easily can find information about the school and curriculum.
5. _____ An orientation program is provided for new families in the district.
6. _____ Informal occasions are provided where staff and families can get to know each other during the school year.
7. _____ The principal offers monthly hours when families can stop in; regular office hours are available for students.
8. _____ There is a suggestion box where teachers, students, and families can contribute ideas.

9. _____ Families can make appointments with the teachers to visit classrooms.
10. _____ The building is used by the community for planned events.
11. _____ Alternative communication methods are used with families speaking limited English in order for them to understand the curriculum and participate in activities.
12. _____ Information about school rules, parent-teacher conferences, school and classroom policy, and bus and lunch schedules is available to families.
13. _____ Assistance is given to families to help them choose an appropriate educational program for their children.
14. _____ Students are encouraged and praised by staff.
15. _____ Local businesses and associations offer information and enrichment projects to students.
16. _____ A resource center that provides parenting information is available for families and teachers.
17. _____ There is a bulletin board on which families can post news and announcements.
18. _____ A computer or other source is available for families to gain access to information about events and curriculum.
19. _____ Principals and staff are willing to listen to family concerns about incorrect student placement and are willing to make adjustments when appropriate.
20. _____ Whenever possible, staff is willing to honor family requests about class assignment.

Appendix G

What Families Want to Know

In response to an information survey, approximately 50 family members from several Wisconsin school districts expressed what they would like to say to teachers and what information they would consider the most beneficial in helping their children learn.

Families Want to Belong

- I want to belong.
- Welcome me to the school; don't shut me out.
- Invite me to school; take the initiative.
- Ask for my input, but don't intimidate me.
- Tell me how I can participate in school activities.
- I would like to be a member of an advisory council or family involvement committee.

Families Want Teacher Contact

- I would like my children's teachers to call me.
- Because I work, I need evening teacher conferences.
- Let me know what my children are studying.
- I want to meet the teachers at least once a month.
- Keep communications clear, brief, and simple, not overly technical.

Families Want Information

- Tell me the philosophy of the school, the channels of authority, and the general goals of each subject studied.

- Tell me the best time to call the teachers, the names of the staff, and their telephone numbers.
- Send me a weekly or monthly newsletter that lists school events, community resources, and enrichment programs.
- I need to learn strategies I can use with my children when dealing with alcohol and other drug prevention, video games, TV programs, peer pressure, and study skills.
- I would appreciate family education workshops or videos to learn about communicating with teens, how to motivate children to study, social pressures, curfews and family rules, college applications, and helping with homework.

Families Want to Help

- Give me ideas on how to complement what my children are learning in school.
- I need ideas for enrichment to supplement my children's classes.
- What can I do to help with homework?
- I need to know what teachers expect at each grade level in emotional, social, and cognitive growth areas.
- If a problem arises with school work, contact me immediately; don't wait for weeks.
- What are your expectations of my children?
- I'd like a family attendance day so I can understand my children's classes better.

Families Want Teachers to Love and Discipline Their Children

- Do something to make my children feel good about themselves.
- Make rules clear and don't put up with inappropriate student behavior.
- Relax when students are acting normally.
- Remind yourselves that you are an important influence in children's lives.
- If I complain about something, don't "take it out" on my children.
- Avoid stereotyping children.
- Praise students for good efforts.
- Contact me about good news too, not only about problems.
- Tell me your expectations of my children.
- Care about my children.

From *Families and Education: An Educator's Resource for Family Involvement*, Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction.

Appendix H

Family Involvement: Reconnecting Schools and Communities

The single most important determinant of a child's success in school, and ultimately throughout life, is not family status, education level, income, or IQ. It is whether that child's family is involved in his or her education.

This proposition may sound radical, but there is a mounting body of evidence that is difficult to dispute. Study after study shows that when families are involved, children do better in school and schools improve. Students whose families stay in touch with the school score higher scholastically than children of similar aptitude and background whose families are not involved. Programs with a family-involvement component are more effective than otherwise identical programs without one. Schools that connect to their communities by serving as polling places and neighborhood facilities have higher graduation rates. The effect goes well beyond the short term, and it is especially pronounced for children at risk.

Pro-Family Restructuring

Knowing this, how can we address the restructuring of our public schools without first considering the critical role that families play in improved student achievement, the outcome by which our success must ultimately be judged?

Not only should families—the primary stakeholders in the quality of public schools—be involved in the process of restructuring, the primary goal of the entire endeavor must be to transform the relationship between families and schools from one that is distant and wary to one that is intimate and trusting.

If families are not an integral part of the entire learning process, children find it difficult to integrate the separate experiences of home and school. If home and school are in conflict, the children tend to fall behind and drop out.

Some of the most successful programs to transform schools through intensive family involvement have been designed by Yale psychiatrist James Comer. His theory is clear and direct: children learn from people with whom they bond. If the attitudes, behavior, and expectations of the school staff are substantially different from those at home, children often become completely alienated from school by the time they are eight years old.

Effective Strategies

There are a number of strategies that schools can employ to establish an effective family-school partnership. While they are not difficult or complex, for many schools they will definitely involve restructuring.

- School staff must get to know each child well. It is much more difficult to “write off” students you know and care about. For secondary schools, a teacher-advisory system is recommended where each teacher has responsibility and specific opportunities built into the weekly schedule for close interaction with about 20

students and ongoing communication with their families.

- The teacher should make at least one personal contact with each student's family every month over the phone, at home, or in the community if a family member is unable or reluctant to come to school.
- Families should also have at least one opportunity a month to get acquainted with the school. A back-to-school night is great except that it is held only once a year. Other possibilities include social events, such as a family spaghetti dinner; report card days when families come to school to pick them up; an evening awards assembly to recognize students, teachers, and families for their contributions to the school; an all-day open house; or a weekend family picnic to celebrate the return of spring. The various elements of the school community, such as the PTA, the faculty, the principal's office, or a local business, can take turns sponsoring the events.
- For families to share in the life of the school, they must be welcome in the building at all times. This means blanket permission to do such things as have lunch with their kids; visit the classrooms; use the library; or talk to the principal, guidance counselors, and teachers.

Schools that Welcome

Indicators that say, "This school is open to everyone" might include welcome signs in all languages spoken by school families; a family room equipped with comfortable furniture, a typewriter, and telephones; and a corner in the library stocked with recommended mate-

rials and readings for families and copies of currently used textbooks.

The school should be a community resource. Schools that provide their communities with a variety of services enjoy a deservedly better reputation. They are also much more likely to have bond issues approved. Community meetings, adult education, local theatrical productions, health screening, candidate nights, and physical fitness classes all are legitimate uses of school facilities, and all contribute to the well-being of the community. The school should also serve as a primary referral point for needed social services.

Some of these recommendations will cost money, but they are strong preventive medicine. Recent evaluations on dropout prevention programs show that they are too little, too late, yet their cost would probably underwrite what we have been discussing. When we consider that the bill to society for a single unproductive, anti-social citizen is upwards of \$55,000 a year, we don't really have a choice. By getting families more involved, we can restructure our schools in a way that reconnects them to the communities they are intended to serve.

Anne Henderson wrote this commentary for Policy Briefs, No. 9, 1990, *Parent Involvement in School Restructuring*, a publication of the North Central Regional Educational Laboratory. She is an associate with the National Committee for Citizens in Education, author of *The Evidence Continues to Grow: Parent Involvement Improves Student Achievement*, and co-author of *Beyond the Bake Sale: An Educator's Guide to Working with Parents*.



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