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ABSTRACT

This guide helps schools think about how effectively they ensure that all families in the community are welcomed into school efforts. It features four sections highlighting areas that are important when considering all families in school improvement efforts. Each section contains examples from schools which are doing well, items to respond to, and questions to consider when evaluating how well the school is doing. An introduction explains the importance of school inclusiveness. Section 1, "'Community' Means Valuing Everyone's Contribution," explains that families are important in making schools successful places for learning, and if any family is missing, then the school community is diminished. Section 2, "Keeping the Lines of Communication Open," notes the importance of ongoing communication that respects each family and is responsive to the needs of the community. Section 3, "Making Decisions to Improve the Learning of All Students," explains the need for diverse and representative decision-making groups. Section 4, "Evaluation: Taking the Temperature of the School," discusses the need for evaluating how well each student is doing and how each student and family feels about the school experience. Each section contains a score card for evaluating the school's effectiveness in becoming an inclusive learning environment. (SM)

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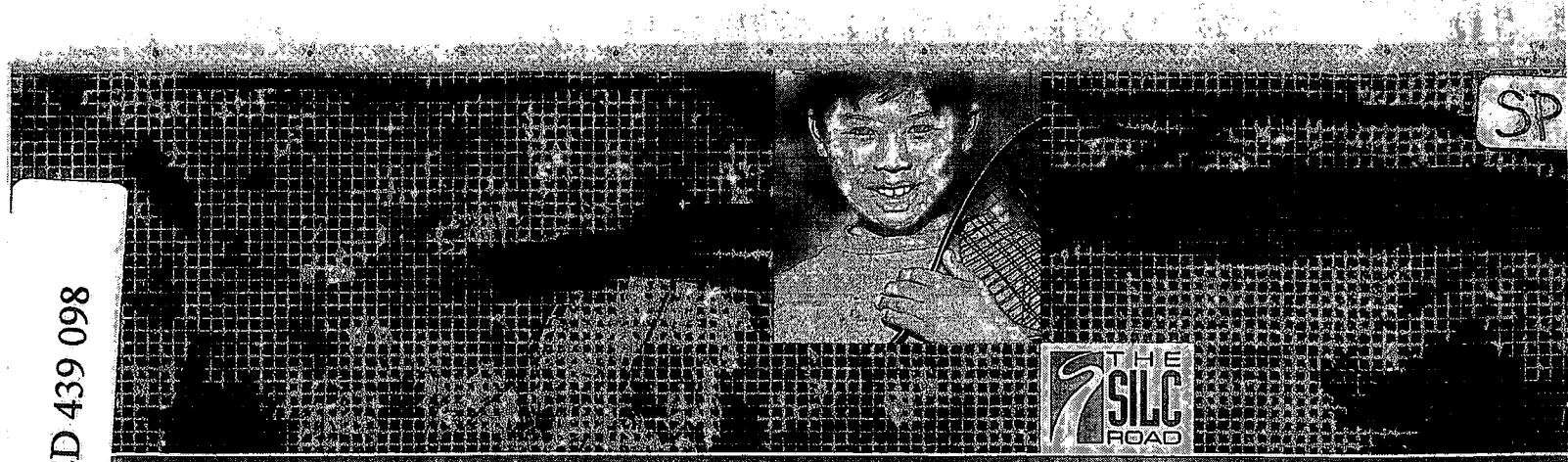

THE SILC ROAD

SUPPORTING INCLUSIVE LEARNING COMMUNITIES

families

SP039048

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Key Participants in **S**upporting
Inclusive
Learning
Communities

This guide was created to help you think about how well your school is doing in making sure ALL FAMILIES *in your community are welcomed and included in school efforts.*

The SILC ROAD Project is a partnership between the Colorado Department of Education, the University of Colorado at Denver and the PEAK Parent Center. It empowers local school improvement efforts to provide high quality education and social experiences to ALL STUDENTS.

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i l i e s

Dear School or Parent Group Leader,

The guide is divided into four sections, each one highlighting an area that is important when considering all families in school improvement efforts. Each section contains items for you to respond to, examples from schools which are doing well in that area, and, questions to think about when evaluating how well your school may be doing. It will be important to look at your school honestly and objectively. No matter where your school is in involving families in school efforts, there is always room for improvement.

You might start by piloting this guide with decision-making or parent advocacy groups in your school or community. These groups should represent the families in your school. You may want to broaden the group surveyed to ensure representation from all families. Special effort may be necessary to get feedback from those families who are not able to attend meetings or who feel alienated in some way.

Included with this guide is a score card *(inside back cover).* **Since the guide is designed to both provide and collect information; the guide itself can be kept by those who participate, and the score card can be returned to the school to collate responses.**

It is always difficult to make changes even when there is widespread agreement that change needs to happen. What you learn about your school after collecting this information will help you to look at specific issues. These issues can then become targets for your school improvement plans. What issues will you tackle this year? What is your plan for accomplishing this? When thinking about how you are going to reach your goals, consider the items in each section of this document as they themselves contain ideas for strategies which can assist you. The hard work begins as you decide who will be responsible for tasks, what the timeline will be, and what resources will be needed.

Use this evaluation guide each year or at whatever intervals will allow you to determine the effects of your improvement efforts. It is important to continue to learn from each other and find ways to work together to best include all families — who collectively are your greatest resources.

Good Luck.

The SILC Project Family Involvement Workgroup

introd

As we move into the 21st Century, educators are beginning to understand and use practices that improve schools for all students. On the other hand, public dissatisfaction with the effectiveness of the school system is at an all-time high. We are clearly at a critical point in the evolution of America's educational system.

In the not so distant past, the public education system was formed out of the desire and work of families and communities to ensure that their children were educated. It is time to acknowledge the importance of the roles of the family and community in improving schools.

Today, families and schools are more diverse than ever. In addition, many schools are welcoming back students who, were sent away to specialized programs in the past because of diverse needs. These schools are learning the importance and the tremendous benefit of an environment that is inclusive of all learners. In this environment each student is recognized as having unique learning styles and needs, and is valued as a contributor to the community.

Today, school communities need to be inclusive of all families as well. This is not an easy task, but it is an important one which benefits everyone. Families can play a range of roles in the school learning community. School staff need to join with families and community members to identify and put into practice the strategies which will support all families to feel valued, empowered and engaged in the important business of their school.

As you respond to the items in each section, please keep in mind that the word COMMUNITY is used and defined as school staff, families, students, and community members who represent the array of diversity evident in the school (people from various cultures and ethnic backgrounds, single parents, non-English language speakers, individuals with disabilities, etc.)

"Real change can only come as a result of the commitments of both the minds and hearts of the total school community – teachers, parents, students, administrators, and school boards".

Sarason

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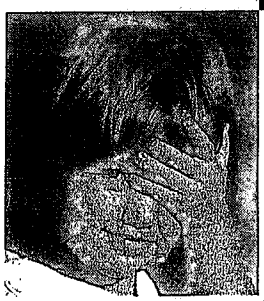
section

"community" means valuing everyone's contribution

Inclusive learning communities understand that families are important in making school a successful place for learning. If any one family is missing from the picture or if someone is seen as having nothing to contribute, then the school community is diminished, it can not be whole and will not be successful. Sometimes deliberate efforts must be made to uncover and use the unique skills and contributions of family members.

> *"All communities depend on the capacity of people – on their fullness, on their possibility – the heart of community is 'capacity.'"*
>
> — McKnight



Lopez Elementary: the legacy of family stories

Lopez Elementary School is located in a predominantly Hispanic neighborhood of a major American city. When their school district began major change efforts, families and teachers at Lopez developed a plan to increase family and community roles in a variety of school activities. Their project emphasizes including all families, along with all other members of the school community, in the roles of planners for future school efforts, decision-makers, and lifelong learners. Family literacy is one key strategy which is a focus at Lopez. Regardless of their educational levels or abilities, families are given opportunities to contribute by sharing with their child and his or her classmates stories about their cultural and familial heritage. These stories are then used as a basis for literacy learning.

contributions

- Families are experts in areas that contribute to successful schooling
- Families understand their community, including the values and cultures
- Families link learning from school to home and community for students

HOW DO YOU RATE THE CONTRIBUTION EFFORTS AT YOUR SCHOOL?

④ = We do this well ③ = We're working on this ② = We tried but gave up ① = We haven't considered this but need to Ⓓ = Don't know

1 Our school recognizes all families as valuable contributors who can enrich the lives of all students.

④ ③ ② ① Ⓓ

2 Our school has a volunteer program where families are active in a variety of roles, including developing volunteer opportunities, recruiting other families and performing the work needed (i.e. parents as paid volunteer coordinators, etc.).

④ ③ ② ① Ⓓ

3 Our school has a PTA / PTO with broad participation from many families.

④ ③ ② ① Ⓓ

4 Families are encouraged to contribute their time and expertise to provide a variety of different learning opportunities for ALL students.

④ ③ ② ① Ⓓ

5 Families are invited and encouraged to share stories, traditions and experiences of their culture.

④ ③ ② ① Ⓓ

6 Families are encouraged to mentor and guide ALL students.

④ ③ ② ① Ⓓ

7 Families are viewed as partners in teaching students both at school and at home.

④ ③ ② ① Ⓓ

8 Families are encouraged to locate or develop resources to improve existing school programs or to develop new ones.

④ ③ ② ① Ⓓ

9 Our school allots the necessary resources, such as child-care, training, transportation costs and materials, etc., ta support families to actively share in school efforts.

④ ③ ② ① Ⓓ

10 Families and extended families participate in planning and sponsoring school events and activities.

④ ③ ② ① Ⓓ

11 Families and extended families, representing the diversity of the school community, attend school events and activities.

④ ③ ② ① Ⓓ

12 Our school incorporates and acts upon suggestions and ideas from families and community members.

④ ③ ② ① Ⓓ

DISCUSSION

What strategies are currently in use at your school?

What strategies can you think of that could work for your school community to ensure everyone contribute in the learning of ALL students?

strategies

- Initiating mentorship programs where family members are matched to students to support their growth and learning in a variety of ways.
- Developing a list of ways that families and community members can contribute outside of the school day.
- Creating a committee of family and community "interpreters" to ensure that all school communication, events and activities meet the language needs within the school community.

section

keeping the lines of communication open

Schools are more efficient and effective when families, students, school staff and community members are well informed. Ongoing communication that respects each family and is responsive to the needs of the community is critical.

hello are you there? making sure that everyone hears and is heard

Mountain Ridge Elementary had a number of families that were unable to make it to school meetings and activities because of work schedules. Through gathering more information, the decision-making team found out that it was especially difficult for working single parents to make the PTA and other informative meetings in the evening. Since there was typically a number of issues related to school decisions shared at the PTA and other family meetings, the team decided to institute an alternative way of getting information to and from these families.

The result was the formation of the Mountain Ridge Communication Connection. A telephone tree was established for those who were interested. Then a number of volunteers attending the meeting were given the list of meeting items, decisions made or information shared to inform the first person on the telephone tree. That person in turn called another family and provided them with the information. Not only did these families keep up with news from the school, they were also able to share their ideas and suggestions for the volunteers to take back to future meetings.

- Promotes understanding and trust
- Ensures connection and application of learning tween the school, family, student and the mmunity
- Ensures that the entire "school community" is included and valued
- Provides shared information about the needs of individual student so that instruction can best address the needs of ALL students

HOW DO YOU RATE THE COMMUNICATION EFFORTS AT YOUR SCHOOL?

④ = We do this well ③ = We're working on this ② = We tried but gave up ① = We hoven't considered this but need to Ⓓ = Don't know

1 Families feel welcome at the school.

④ ③ ② ① Ⓓ

2 The school keeps families informed of activities, deicison-making meetings and current issues and concerns on a regular basis.

④ ③ ② ① Ⓓ

3 Information is provided to families in a clear and understandable manner.

④ ③ ② ① Ⓓ

4 Information is provided that is sensitive to the individual needs of families, such as childcare and reduced lunch.

④ ③ ② ① Ⓓ

5 Information is shared in a variety of ways (family-led conferences, back and forth notebooks, phone calls, home visits, e-mail, community bulletin boards, etc.).

④ ③ ② ① Ⓓ

6 Families feel valued and respected within the school community.

④ ③ ② ① Ⓓ

7 School staff feels valued and respected within the school community.

④ ③ ② ① Ⓓ

8 Advocates and mentors are available to families when needed.

④ ③ ② ① Ⓓ

DISCUSSION

What strategies are currently in use at your school?

What strategies can you think of that could work for your school community to ensure everyone contribute in the learning of ALL students?

strategies

- Establishing a "hot line" manned by family and community members to answer questions about school issues such as standards, grading, etc.
- Creating a networking bulletin board and web page where family and community members can post information, news, thoughts, etc.
- Developing a bank of videotapes, available in languages spoken in the community, to provide information to families and community members about school related issues. Also, making available use of the VCRs at the school, community center, public library, etc.

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section 3 making decisions to improve the learning of all students

Effective schools work together to develop decision-making groups that are representative of the school community. It is important to have families, students, school staff, and community members all participate in decision-making that positively affects student learning. Research and best practice have shown that family and community involvement in decision-making within the school is critical.

working side by side: making joint decisions for better schools

Three years ago, the school improvement team at Brunt Middle School began to look at how all students in their school were learning. After collecting information, the committee found out that students who received special education services did much better academically and socially when they were educated in the general education classroom. All students surveyed commented on how useful the additional support was in the classroom when two teachers were available to help all students. General educators reported that they were learning new ways to facilitate learning by working with special educators on accommodating and modifying the curriculum.

Most parents were happy with how their students did in classes, however, a few were concerned that their son or daughter would not continue to do well unless they were pulled out of the general education classroom for specific instruction during the day. After analyzing all this information, the school improvement team suggested the following in an effort to ensure that the needs of all students were met in inclusive classrooms:

1. the building daily schedule should have built in time for general and special educators to co-plan and co-teach on an ongoing basis;
2. new staff should be hired with an understanding that they will work with all students;
3. there should be ongoing documentation of ALL student success in co-taught classrooms;
4. progress reports should be shared with parents by the general education staff supported by special education teachers, and;
5. parents with concerns and educational staff should have weekly contact as needed to continually assess student progress in the general education classroom.

decision-making

- Families are more likely to support school policy and programs when they participate in making decisions.
- Families can assist in finding financial supports and resources to carry out shared decisions
- Families can provide information to make instruction and curriculum more meaningful and relevant to students.

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"The greatest thing in this world is not so much where we are, but in which direction we are moving."

– Oliver Wendell Holmes

HOW DO YOU RATE THE DECISION-MAKING EFFORTS AT YOUR SCHOOL?

④ = We do this well ③ = We're working on this ② = We tried but gave up ① = We haven't considered this but need to ⓪ = Don't know

1. Our school has one or more groups of people that make important decisions about how the school is run such as the building accountability committee, the materials review council, etc.
   ④ ③ ② ① ⓪
2. Decision-making groups include family members
   ④ ③ ② ① ⓪
3. The families who participate in these decision-making groups represent the array of diversity evident within the school (e.g. single parent families, non-English speakers and families of students with disabilities, etc).
   ④ ③ ② ① ⓪
4. There is training available to assist family members to make informed decisions.
   ④ ③ ② ① ⓪
5. The decision-making groups use a variety of methods to get input and feedback from other families about how the school is doing in educating ALL learners.
   ④ ③ ② ① ⓪
6. The decision-making groups use this input and feedback to make informed decisions concerning student learning and activities, policy, budget and school reform efforts.
   ④ ③ ② ① ⓪
7. The decision-making group reaches out to encourage participation by those not currently involved
   ④ ③ ② ① ⓪

DISCUSSION

What strategies are currently in use at your school?

What strategies can you think of that could work for your school community to ensure everyone contribute in the learning of ALL students?

strategies

- Setting up interview teams that include families, students, educators and community members when selecting school personnel
- Providing training for all team members on ways to work together to effectively make decisions
- Scheduling meetings at a variety of community sites or individuals' homes

section 4 evaluation: taking the temperature of the school

Collecting information about how each student is doing is important. In addition, schools need to know what learners and their families think about their school experiences to determine how well the school is doing in educating ALL learners. Decision-making teams can use this information to develop school improvement plans.

getting the facts: a school that wanted to know

Consider the story of PrarieView High School. The student population is rich with many different ethnic and social backgrounds. Unfortunately, not all of the students are doing well at the high school. The information collected by the school indicated that there was an increasing problem with attendance of 9th grade students. In addition, the dropout rate had begun to multiply in recent years. The facts also indicated that the majority of students dropping out were of Hispanic background. The decision-making committee decided it was important to get more in-depth information about why students were not attending or dropping out. Groups of students who had attendance problems were interviewed about what was working and what was not at their school. Students who were Hispanic and doing well were also interviewed to find out what was different for them from their peers that were dropping out. Results of the interviews showed that students returned to or stayed in school when they felt supported by school staff and their parents or someone significant in their life. Students also indicated language differences sometimes caused confusion but did not make the student a "slow" learner. With this information, the decision-making team can now make plans on how to best support the needs of ALL of their students.

evaluation

- Families understand the wide variety of student and community needs when they are involved in evaluation efforts
- Families understand and support change when they participate in collecting feedback about decisions

"The message is not the traditional "plan, then do... But "do then plan... and do and plan some more."

– Fullan & Miles, 1992

HOW DO YOU RATE THE EVALUATION EFFORTS AT YOUR SCHOOL?

④ = We do this well ③ = We're working on this ② = We tried but gave up ① = We haven't considered this but need to Ⓓ = Don't know

1. Families receive information about how students are doing in school, including student achievement scores, attendance, dropout, and suspension/expulsion rates.

   ④ ③ ② ① Ⓓ

2. The information that is collected and shared describes how ALL of the students attending the school are performing, including those who receive special education services and those who are second language learners.

   ④ ③ ② ① Ⓓ

3. Families have an opportunity to give input about the effectiveness of the supports and services provided by the school to meet the needs of all children and their families (e.g. counseling, after school programs, etc.)

   ④ ③ ② ① Ⓓ

4. The feedback provided by families is used to develop the school improvement plan.

   ④ ③ ② ① Ⓓ

DISCUSSION

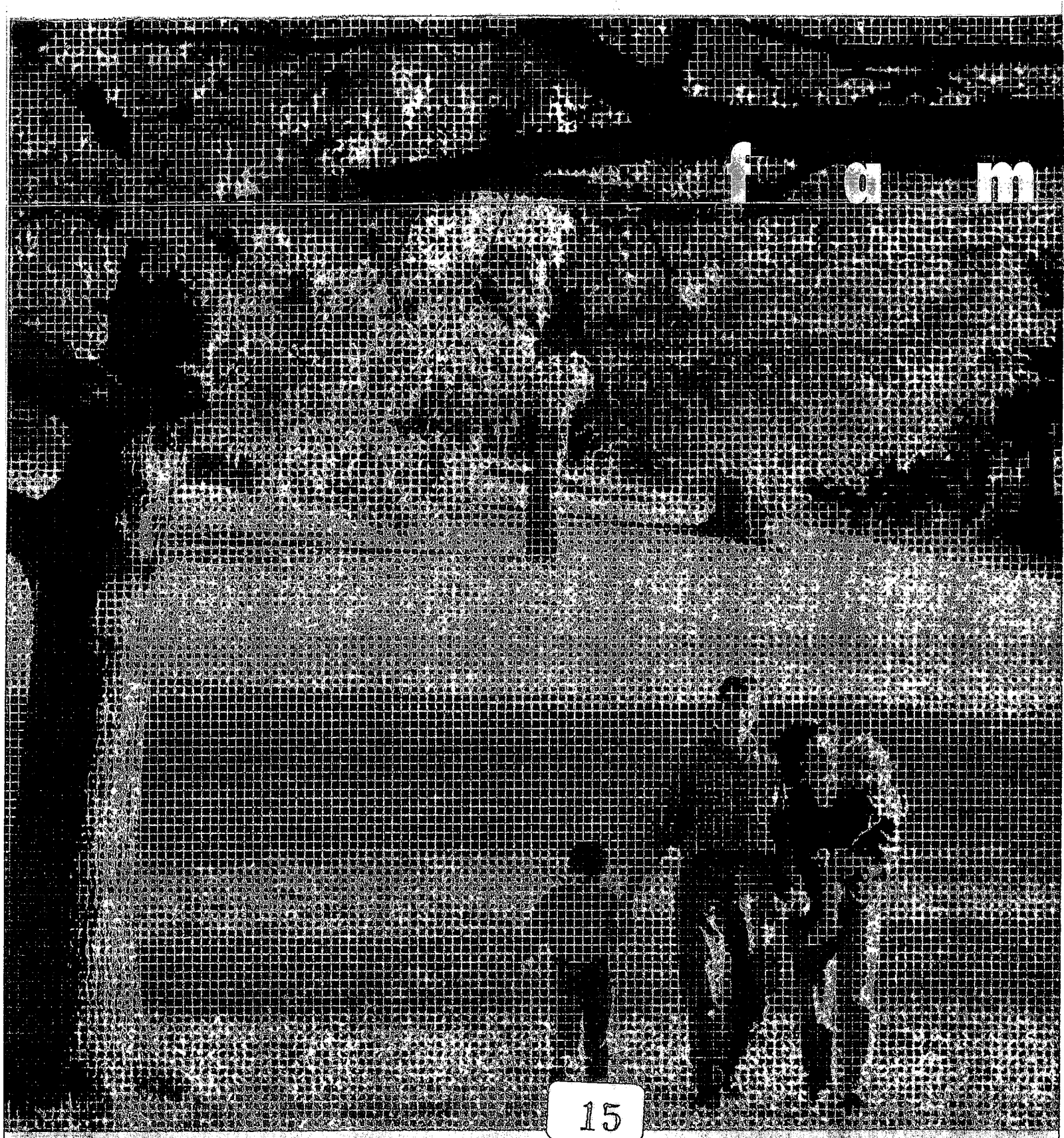
What strategies are currently in use at your school?

What strategies can you think of that could work for your school community to ensure everyone contribute in the learning of ALL students?

What other ways might the school community gather and use information to develop a school improvement plan?

strategies

- Gathering information using a survey developed and distributed by families, community members, educators, students and administrators
- Recruiting a team from the school community to gather ideas and suggestions about school improvemenet in a variety of ways such as surveys, mailings, telephone and face to face contacts
- Hosting a coffee or tea at a family home to discuss topical areas relative to what is happening in the school or community



"Let no child be demeaned, nor have his wonder diminished, because of our ignorance or inactivity. Let no child be deprived of discovery, because we lack the resources to discover his problem. Let no child ever doubt [illegible]elf or his mind because we are unsure of our commitment."

– Allen Martin

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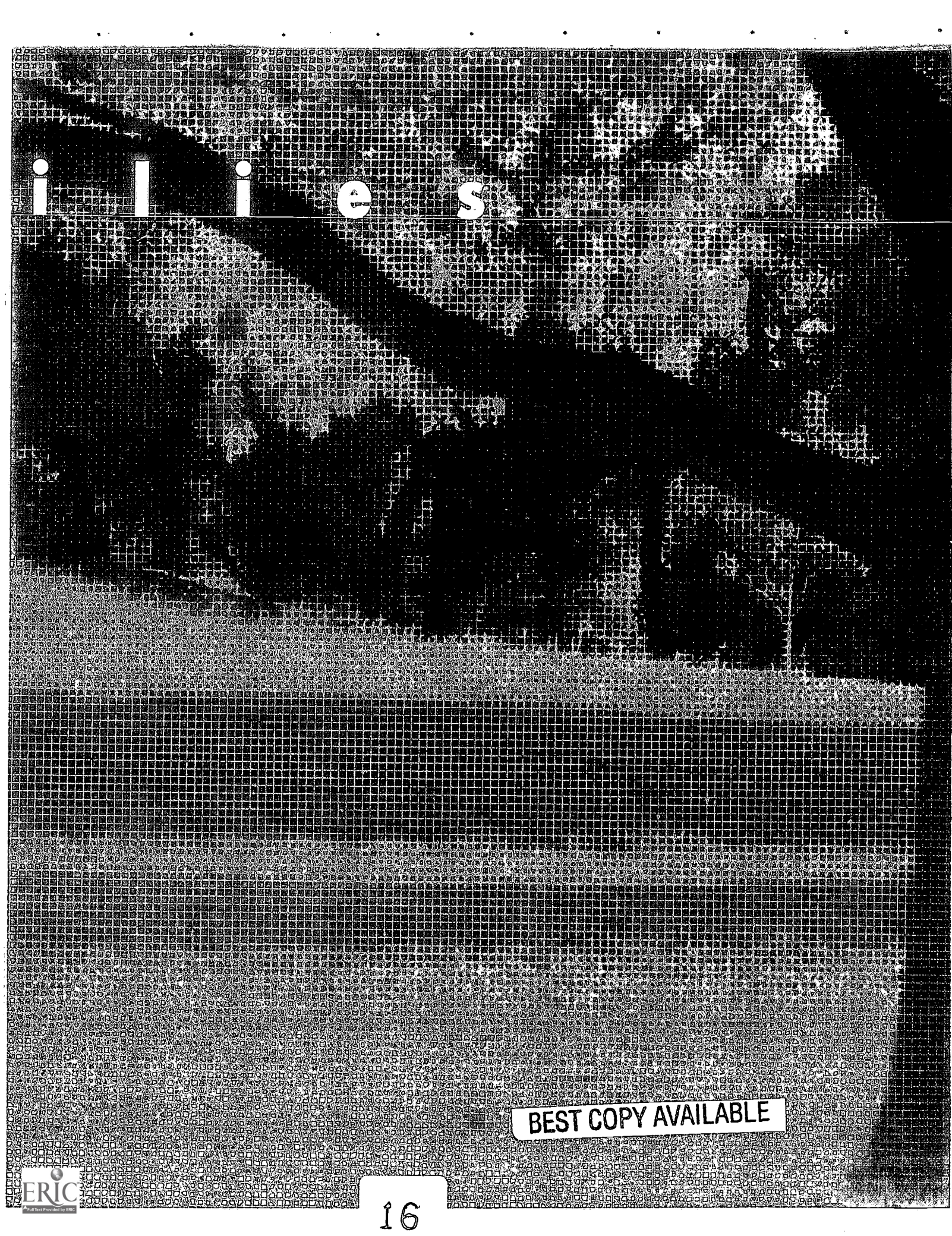

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Please fill in your responses and write in suggestions you have for each section. You may then detach your score card, along the perforation, and hand into personnel collecting this information. Thank you for taking your time to fill this out. Your feedback and suggestions are very valuable to the school.

I have filled this out in my role as: ☐ a family member of a student in this school – ☐ an educator in this school
☐ an administrator in this school – ☐ a support staff member in the building
☐ a community member with no student in this school – ☐ a student

Section 1: families as contributors

1.	④	③	②	①	Ⓓ	Things I think work well in this school:
2.	④	③	②	①	Ⓓ	
3.	④	③	②	①	Ⓓ	
4.	④	③	②	①	Ⓓ	
5.	④	③	②	①	Ⓓ	Things I would like to suggest:
6.	④	③	②	①	Ⓓ	
7.	④	③	②	①	Ⓓ	
8.	④	③	②	①	Ⓓ	
9.	④	③	②	①	Ⓓ	
10.	④	③	②	①	Ⓓ	
11.	④	③	②	①	Ⓓ	
12.	④	③	②	①	Ⓓ	

Section 2: families as communicators

1.	④	③	②	①	Ⓓ	Things I think work well in this school:
2.	④	③	②	①	Ⓓ	
3.	④	③	②	①	Ⓓ	
4.	④	③	②	①	Ⓓ	
5.	④	③	②	①	Ⓓ	Things I would like to suggest:
6.	④	③	②	①	Ⓓ	
7.	④	③	②	①	Ⓓ	
8.	④	③	②	①	Ⓓ	

Section 3: families as decision-makers

1.	④	③	②	①	Ⓓ	Things I think work well in this school:
2.	④	③	②	①	Ⓓ	
3.	④	③	②	①	Ⓓ	
4.	④	③	②	①	Ⓓ	
5.	④	③	②	①	Ⓓ	Things I would like to suggest:
6.	④	③	②	①	Ⓓ	
7.	④	③	②	①	Ⓓ	

Section 4: families as evaluators

1.	④	③	②	①	Ⓓ	Things I think work well in this school:
2.	④	③	②	①	Ⓓ	
3.	④	③	②	①	Ⓓ	
4.	④	③	②	①	Ⓓ	

Things I would like to suggest:

A SILC ROAD PUBLICATION

The Colorado Department of Education

PEAK Parent Center

University of Colorado at Denver
Resources for Inclusionary Practices
Center for Collaborative Educational Leadership

U.S. Department of Education
Office of Educational Research and Improvement (OERI)
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