



# Engaging Parents in a Community Youth Development Initiative

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## About the REACH Issue Brief Series

In 2006, Sierra Health Foundation began the REACH youth development program, committing \$8 million to support the healthy development of youth in the Greater Sacramento, California, region. As a centerpiece of the larger program, seven communities in the region were awarded grants from 2006 to 2010 to assess community conditions, build community capacity for change and implement strategies that increase meaningful supports and opportunities for youth. Coalition development and direct, meaningful engagement of youth are key REACH objectives. Committed to making REACH a learning opportunity, Sierra Health Foundation asked an evaluation team from the University of California, Davis to assess the outcomes of the program and to document lessons learned. This issue brief is one of a series developed to share outcomes and lessons on topics of interest. For more information on the REACH program, visit Sierra Health Foundation's web site, [www.sierrahealth.org](http://www.sierrahealth.org). For information on the evaluation, visit the UC Cooperative Extension California Communities Program web site, <http://groups.ucanr.org/CCP/index.cfm>.

Engaging parents and family members in their children's lives is critical to youth's success in school and life (Terzian & Mbwana, 2009; Mbwana et al. 2009). When families are involved, youth receive higher grades, attend school more frequently, perform better in standardized testing, show improved behavior and are more likely to graduate (Marks 2000; Steinberg et al. 1992; Delgado-Bernal 2001; Mitra 2006). Despite this evidence, many schools and other youth-serving organizations struggle to develop meaningful and effective parental engagement strategies. Busy parents often have little time to commit to these efforts. Institutional budgets and grants often treat parent engagement as an afterthought, at best. Where cultural or linguistic barriers exist, the difficulties can be compounded, unless a deliberate strategy is undertaken.

Against this backdrop, this issue brief examines the REACH youth development program during which parent engagement was given special emphasis. This analysis discusses the: 1) evolution of parent engagement approaches during the initiative; 2) types of parent engagement strategies employed by community coalitions, and the strengths and limitations of each approach; 3) benefits that parents, youth and coalition leaders attribute to these strategies; 4) challenges encountered; and 5) lessons learned, which may be applicable in other settings.

## The Evolution of Parent Engagement within REACH

The goal of REACH was to create community coalitions in which adults and youth work together to increase supports and opportunities for all youth. While youth engagement was a major emphasis from the beginning of the program, parent engagement did not become a focus of attention for most grantees until later in the process, when coalitions began to see parental attendance at coalition meetings. Because the program primarily targeted youth ages 10 to 15, parents were involved from the beginning, indirectly by allowing their children to attend, and directly by driving youth to activities, providing food, helping site coordinators set up or clean up at meetings, publicizing events or serving as chaperones. As some parents became more involved, their participation levels expanded to include contributing their own ideas, resources and social capital to support the community change strategies sought out by the coalitions.

Youth often were instrumental in engaging their parents in the substantive work of the coalitions. In some cases, youth asked their parents to join the meetings instead of simply dropping them off or waiting in the vehicle for

the meetings to conclude. In other cases, youth recruited their parents to be participants in coalition-sponsored events and activities.

As the program proceeded, coalition coordinators identified parent engagement as an emergent and promising part of their work. Realizing the opportunity, Sierra Health Foundation supported the coalitions with supplemental grants of \$15,000 to fund special parent engagement activities and/or additional activities with youth older than the 10- to 15-year-old target ages. Six of the coalitions chose to devote resources and attention to engaging parents. REACH's technical assistance providers helped to facilitate a learning community setting among coordinators. There, coordinators discussed experiences in their own coalitions and brainstormed effective strategies. As we write this brief, it has been approximately two years since the parent engagement grants were awarded.

Parents and other adult allies participated with youth at REACH conferences, workshops and meetings.



We interviewed coalition leaders, youth and parents to obtain their perspectives on the value and benefits of parent engagement as part of a community change strategy focused on youth development. While the nature and degree of parent engagement has varied from coalition to coalition, and while only a small number of parents became highly engaged in coalition activities, the overall impressions of this work are positive. Parent engagement in the common cause has helped to:

- build meaningful relationships among youth, parents and other adults;
- broaden the base of public support for coalition initiatives and youth development;
- better connect parents to their children and to the work of the coalition;
- demonstrate that parents can be valuable assets to a community change strategy, even when their support is minimal or they simply work hard to become better parents; and
- create a sense of pride in youth, or as one youth put it, “I like that other people know who my mom is because she helps us out.”

### **A Variety of Parent Engagement Strategies**

Coalitions were given wide latitude to design parent engagement strategies according to their own ideas or the particular characteristics of their local setting. Four approaches were evident:

- activities to expand and deepen social connections and relationships;
- parent training and education;
- fostering direct parental engagement in the work of the coalition; and
- fostering direct parental engagement with their children’s schools.

### **Building Social Connections**

This approach emphasized building informal social connection among parents, youth and coalition members. For example, the West Sacramento Youth Resource Coalition used its supplemental grant to organize recurring social gatherings for parents and youth to come together. The gatherings built community and also provided an occasion to update parents about youth

activities with the coalition. As a regular feature of each gathering, youth made a presentation to honor a parent or other adult who had made a difference in their life. The youth cited this activity as a valuable occasion to connect with adults and practice public speaking in a supportive setting.

A strength of this approach is its potential to create greater community cohesion and to build social capital. A limitation is that it does not necessarily lead to greater parent engagement in the work of the coalition; however, the West Sacramento Youth Resource Coalition had a few parents who became regular participants and leaders.

### **Training and Education**

This approach sought to respond to parents who were asking for tools to help them form better relationships with their youth. For example, a Parent Advisory Committee formed by the Vision Coalition of El Dorado Hills articulated the desire for parenting training. In response, the coalition contracted with a statewide training provider to conduct three 10-week parenting workshops. Topics covered included, but were not limited to, drugs, alcohol, gangs, family disintegration, anti-social behavior in youth and reducing family conflict. Of the 22 parents who enrolled, only one couple did not complete the course. Parent evaluations indicate that the course was extremely beneficial.

In another example, the South Sacramento Coalition for Future Leaders, in collaboration with the Youth Development Network, hosted two-day workshops where 33 parents attended. In order to meet the linguistic needs of parents, this event was translated into four different languages.

A strength of the parent training approach is that it can provide tools that adults can use in their day-to-day interactions with their own children or other youth. Limitations include the fact that the trainings sometimes reach a relatively small number of parents, are costly (either to parents or by way of coalition subsidies), and are not necessarily designed to foster parent engagement with other coalition activities. The sustained benefits of such training, in the absence of other ongoing support, can vary substantially.

### Direct Engagement in Coalition Activities

In a number of cases, parents regularly participated in coalition meetings or activities. In Galt, the Galt Area Youth Coalition worked with city and school officials to develop a youth master plan for the community. Three parents became involved in the master plan at an early stage and others joined as the process gained momentum and visibility in the community. Parents attended regular planning meetings and were active participants throughout the yearlong process. The master plan created a venue for adults, parents and youth in the community to work together to produce a document impacting the future of youth in Galt.

One strength of this approach is that parent voices are heard in key community planning processes. Another is that the Latino parents had a chance to become more familiar with the mostly white community leadership structure, and vice versa. Community leaders were able to listen to the needs of Latino parents in a community where advocacy for this population has been minimal. A limitation of this approach is that relatively few parents can afford to commit the time and energy to participate at this level. In addition, for low-income families, work schedules are a major impediment for participation.

### Fostering Direct Engagement of Parents with Schools

One coalition, the Sacramento ACT Meadowview Partnership, focused its efforts on increasing graduation rates in schools. This coalition saw parent engagement as a key strategy to reach that goal. In partnership with the Parent-Teacher Home Visit Project, coalition partners and school staff visited parents in their homes.<sup>1</sup> The purpose of the visits was to make parents aware of school requirements and available resources to support their children's education and development. Building on these successful visits, the coalition worked with school officials to establish a Parent University that meets regularly at the school. Consequently, a college-going culture is being promoted and parents have access to the information and what it takes to help their students at home. Evaluations have shown that these activities are contributing to improved test scores and graduation rates.

A strength of this approach is that it engages parents and families with a key institution in their children's lives—the school system. It combines parent education with the opportunity to expand parent voice within schools. A limitation of this approach is that it is resource-intensive. In Meadowview it requires REACH grant resources as well as other significant funding commitments from different foundations and the school system itself.

### The Benefits of Engaging Parents

Parents view coalitions as a venue and source for learning and as a place where their youth learn skills—such as communication skills, methods for community change and socialization skills—that they do not learn in classrooms. Parents express the multiple benefits gained from their own engagement in the REACH coalitions. These include the following:

- an increased confidence in schools;
- self-confidence to dialogue with school officials about their children;
- improved relationships with their own children;
- a decrease in the feeling of isolation they often feel when dealing with the issues facing their children; and
- the ability to better understand their children in light of learning about the issues that interest and affect youth.

REACH-engaged parents express feeling closer to their children. One parent stated, "... my son is proud that I am also a part of [REACH]. We often talk about the things that are going on." Parents feel closer to their children because their children, seeing them engaged in the activities, also feel that their parents truly care about them and their success. Communication between both groups also has increased and improved. One parent said, "My son now speaks up much more at home; his new confidence makes it easier for us to talk about things together." This makes parents feel good about their ability to understand their children. More significantly, parents have a better understanding of the multiple ways in which they can support the interests of their children.

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1. For more information, see <http://www.pthvp.org/>

For parents of low socioeconomic status—particularly those who are immigrants and/or non-English speakers—involvement in the coalitions was particularly meaningful. Many immigrant parents acquired a better understanding of the U.S. educational system, enabling them to better support the education of their children. For example, it has enabled them to become involved in PTA meetings, provided confidence to speak with their children’s teachers and participate in other school activities. Parents also gained an understanding of the benefits—in school, home and elsewhere—that youth receive from participating in after-school programs. Other parents learned that college is a viable option for their children. They became privy to the process of college applications and the ways to support their children during this critical educational milestone.

Two immigrant parents expressed feeling proud that their daughter had an active voice in the coalition and the community, “Our daughter has become very assertive, her self-esteem has gone up and she is not afraid to talk in a room full of adults.” Additionally, the parents stated that this has changed family dynamics; they now seek their daughter’s input in matters at home because they see that she has valuable ideas to contribute.

### Challenges Encountered

REACH coalitions faced a dual challenge in their efforts to improve parent engagement. The obvious challenge is to garner the involvement of busy parents; the deeper challenge is to move from parent involvement to parent engagement. When schools and organizations *involve* parents, they pursue their efforts with the interests of the institution at hand. When parents are *engaged*, there is a concentrated effort to develop and build a genuine relationship with them (Ferlazzo, 2009).



REACH Camp provided an opportunity for parents and other adults to be actively involved with their children and other youth.

Changes to accommodate parents and make them feel a part of the coalition are necessary to keep them attending meetings. These changes include altering meeting times and places, implementing different decision-making processes, providing translation and creating parental advisory groups. Those coalitions that have had higher parent attendance held meetings at times that were convenient for parents, usually by providing dinner and a child-friendly environment where younger children were welcome, as well.

Parents become more deeply engaged when they feel free and encouraged to express their ideas or to utilize their resources to sustain coalition efforts. A key element of this engagement is to take into account the feelings of parents; it is important that parents feel they are key coalition members, no matter what role they play. For example, parents associated with the Woodland Coalition for Youth have taken the initiative to cook for meetings and organize events. They take pride in the coalition and its achievements. As one parent stated, “When our youth succeed, we succeed.”



Children and youth are joined by parents and other adults at the monthly Art Walk, held by the South Sacramento Coalition for Future Leaders.

## Conclusion

Parents are important assets in any community youth development initiative, and they should never be taken for granted or treated as an afterthought in program designs. Schools, community coalitions and youth-serving institutions can employ multiple approaches to increase parent engagement. As is true for their work with youth, these institutions must be able to provide a safe space in which parents are treated as an asset. Parents must feel comfortable and able to become freely and fully engaged.

### Key Recommendations:

The following are some key lessons from the REACH experience:

- Out-of-school programs, such as the REACH coalitions, are able to attract and engage parents who often are not actively involved in school-hour activities.
- Indirect parent involvement—their support for their child's participation—is important, and might unto itself require specific attention.
- Parents enjoy and look forward to activities in which they can socialize with other parents and their children—it is here where they can share their common concerns or joys.
- Coalitions can serve as a portal through which parents gain access to useful services that previously were unknown to them.
- Although immigrant and low-income parents often do not know how to become involved in the education of their children, they often became very involved in REACH coalitions because they felt welcomed and appreciated.
- It is important to train coalition leaders to engage parents. If you treat parents with respect and learn to build on their unique capacities and commitments, they will continue to participate. This training should reflect the cultural and socioeconomic diversity of local youth and their families.
- It is important to hire coalition leaders who bring knowledge of community cultural wealth to bear upon work with parents, and/or grow leaders from within local populations.
- Providing venues and spaces helps parents to meet one another and form informal support groups.
- Providing workshops for parents enables them to become advocates for the work of the coalitions and support the efforts of youth.
- It is important to offer various ways for parents to connect, not a one-size-fits-all approach.
- Parents can serve as advisors and a source of knowledge.
- Not all parents/caretakers will be able to engage—it is important that structures and processes for engaging parents/caretakers do not stigmatize youth whose families are not directly involved.

## For More Information

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