



## Why Community Engagement Matters in School Turnaround

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*Research shows that an authentically engaged community improves schools – not just by participating in school events, but also by helping to shape reform.*

A substantial body of evidence demonstrates that family and community participation is a crucial resource not only for individual student achievement, but also for catalyzing and sustaining school improvement and for building school cultures that support all students (Comer & Haynes, 1992; Epstein 1995; Henderson & Mapp 2002; Sebring et al. 2006; Henderson et al. 2007). There is also ample evidence that schools serving large populations of students of color and students living in poverty have historically been the least successful at such engagement (Lareau & Horvat, 1999; Bryk & Schneider 2002; Epstein & Sanders 2006, Olivos 2012).

These schools – often, the lowest-performing public schools – are precisely the ones that the Obama administration has targeted for turnaround over the past four years through Title I school improvement grants, the Race to the Top Competition, and state-by-state waivers of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act accountability provisions.<sup>1</sup> Because of this, the administration has a special respon-

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<sup>1</sup> For a review of the research base and implementation evidence of the Administration's approach to turning around low-performing schools, see Trujillo and Renée's article in this issue of *VUE*.

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sibility to ensure that its turnaround initiatives treat family and community engagement thoughtfully.

While federal policy has expressed a commitment, in principle, to engagement, in practice, current policy is insufficient to produce the benefits demonstrated by research. The School Improvement Grants (SIG) program was rolled out in the winter of 2010, but the complex application process left little room for families and communities to participate in selecting a model and shaping their schools' plans. The SIG program required funded models to be in place by the start of the school year. But states could only receive applications from districts after the state application was approved, and many states were still waiting for approval in July – leaving inadequate time for meaningful community involvement.

The SIG program also mandated a choice among four prescribed improvement options for struggling schools. These options themselves, at best, make no provision for family and community engagement – and, at worst, can actually actively inhibit it. Closing schools, or firing half their staffs, as required by the “turnaround” model, disrupts existing relationships between teachers and families, and students from closed schools often have to travel to new schools outside their neighborhoods. The “restart” model has almost exclusively been used to transfer schools to charter management organizations and away from direct public oversight – potentially alienating families and communities.

Theoretically, the drastic interventions required by these models could disrupt the most entrenched toxic school cultures and pave the way for better relations with families.<sup>2</sup> But the models – including “transformation,” which

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<sup>2</sup> Though, as Trujillo and Renée note in their article in this issue of *VUE*, there is little empirical evidence for such impacts.

has been used most often – make no provision for the sort of capacity building and investment that would help schools build meaningful engagement. For community groups that had already built relationships with struggling schools to help turn them around, the rigidity of the federal models and the absence of any formal role for family and community constituencies was especially troubling.

Across the country, parents and community members have pressed school boards and district leadership for more transparency and broader participation in decisions about school turnaround. There are signs that the Obama administration has begun to heed calls for more thoughtfulness about how to create space for family and community engagement. The second round of guidance to states and districts on implementing SIG, issued in late 2010, reiterated the importance of community input in shaping school turnarounds and created a “pre-implementation” period in which districts could spend SIG funds on community engagement activities (U.S. Department of Education 2010). In 2012, the U.S. Department of Education (DOE) began issuing waivers to release states from the accountability provision in the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA, currently known as No Child Left Behind).

Among other requirements, states receiving waivers promised to implement one of the four federal models or a similar model of their own design in their lowest-performing schools each year. The ESEA waiver applications specified “ongoing mechanisms for family and community engagement” as one of the guiding principles for school turnaround and described a more robust (and research-based) set of community engagement strategies than had the SIG guidance – including community-wide needs assessments and community asset mapping, establishing organized parent groups, holding public meetings to en-

gage parents and community members in shaping school improvement plans, and providing wraparound supports for students and families (U.S. Department of Education 2012). But most states essentially ignored this principle and received their waivers regardless.

## **WHY FAMILY AND COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT MATTERS IN SCHOOL TURNAROUND**

A substantial body of literature documents the positive impact of parent, family, and community engagement on student achievement. In 2002, Henderson and Mapp reviewed the existing literature on family engagement and found that there was convincing evidence across studies that family engagement positively impacted a range of student outcomes, including grades, course rigor, test scores, social skills, and behavior. Henderson and Mapp also found that the relationship between family engagement and achievement exists across all ethnic and socioeconomic groups and persists across levels of schooling. Other researchers have found similar relationships (Comer & Haynes 1992; Epstein et al. 1997).

In addition to benefiting individual students, family and community engagement is a core resource for whole-school improvement. A longitudinal study of school improvement in Title I schools found that schools in which teachers were “especially active” in meeting with and telephoning parents, and in sharing instructional materials to reinforce learning at home, had larger gains in student achievement (Westat & Policy Studies Associates 2001). A major longitudinal study of school performance in Chicago identified parent-teacher ties as one of the five “essential supports” common to schools that made gains in student achievement (Sebring et al. 2006). Other studies have identified

social trust in schools – among teachers, between teachers and students, and between teachers and parents – as a basic building block for schools that continually improve instructional practice to support all students’ achievement (Payne & Kaba 2001; Bryk & Schneider 2002). Crucially, for family engagement to support whole-school improvement, rather than just individual students, schools must structure important decisions to include family participation (Moore 1998; Mapp 2003; Sebring et al. 2006) and must treat family and community engagement as an integral part of how they function.

Creating opportunities to draw on community resources and connect school and community experiences also holds promise for school improvement. The community schools model, which brings together wraparound services and a range of arts, music, academic, cultural, and other programming for students and parents during and beyond the school day, has improved family engagement and increased student well-being and achievement (Blank, Melaville & Shah 2003). Schools that have partnered with community organizing groups to train parents in organizing and advocacy skills, devise strategies for broadening family and community engagement, and develop teams of parents and teachers to lead school improvement activities have seen improvements in school climate, social capital, teacher-parent ties, and teacher professional capacity, as well as growth in student performance (Murnane & Levy 1996; Mediratta, Shah & McAlister 2009). Studies of organizing have found that one of the central resources organizing groups bring to school reform is a deep knowledge of community context and history – which helps schools shape their work to respond to families’ needs and values (Shirley 1997, 2002; Warren 2001, 2005; Gold, Simon & Brown 2002; Warren & Mapp 2011).

## BUILDING CAPACITY AND TIME FOR REAL ENGAGEMENT

Despite the growing awareness of family and community engagement as a strategy for raising achievement and improving schools, many teachers and schools struggle to build and maintain broad engagement. This is especially true for schools that serve large proportions of students of color and low-income students. Effective engagement rests on relational trust between families and school staff (Payne & Kaba 2001; Bryk & Schneider 2002; Mapp 2003), and building such trust depends on mutually valuing each party's contribution to student learning. Yet teachers sometimes discount or misconstrue the beliefs and practices about home-school relationships rooted in cultures other than their own (Auerbach 2012; Lareau & Horvat 1999). School-family relationships in low-income communities are often shaped by teachers' "deficit" assumptions that low-income parents place a low value on education (Delgado-Gaitan 2001; Olivos 2012). These are often exacerbated by parents' own negative schooling experiences (Lareau & Horvat 1999). Accountability regimes that hold school-level educators almost solely responsible for student achievement, ignoring the influences of funding, policy, poverty, and segregation, further strain teachers' and principals' relationships with families and communities (Mintrop & Sunderman 2009; McAlister et al. 2012).

Thoughtful attention to family and community engagement is even more crucial in turnaround schools. Besides being populated almost exclusively by the low-income families and families of color whom schools have traditionally had the least success in engaging, the schools targeted by SIG and other turnaround initiatives, by definition, are in dire straits. They are often plagued by high teacher and student turnover, disrupting the teacher-parent relationships that are the basis for effective

engagement. The lowest-performing schools are overwhelmingly located in communities facing high poverty, years of marginalization, and a whole host of stresses that distract families and educators from a focus on achievement.

Further, turnaround policies have been structured in such a way that they often interfere with family and community engagement. Turnaround is designed to be a major disruption to how schools operate, in the hopes of generating quick changes and dramatic improvement. All four federal models require the dismissal of at least the school leader, and often teachers as well. Schools with very limited capacity must implement a whole host of changes very quickly, with enormous pressure to raise standardized test scores. Faced with these challenges, there is a very real chance that family and community engagement will fall far down schools' lists of priorities during the turnaround process, especially in schools where it has never been strong.

Deliberate and sustained attention to family and community engagement, supported by capacity building and resources, is crucial to successful turnaround. Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler (1997) identified three interrelated factors that shape parents' motivation to become involved: how they understand their role as parents vis-à-vis the school; their sense of efficacy in positively influencing their children's success; and the invitations, opportunities, and demands for engagement they receive from school. Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler's findings resonate broadly with research on strategies that build effective engagement and point to promising entry points for impacting engagement, such as professional development for teachers and parent skill building.

Professional development that builds the cultural competency of teachers helps them understand and value how parents from various cultures define their roles in supporting their chil-

dren's education (Olivos 2012). Several comprehensive school reform models, including James Comer's School Development Program and the National Network of Partnership Schools at Johns Hopkins University, help schools create appropriate invitations and opportunities for family and community engagement and shift to a shared decision-making model with families.

Skill building for parents, especially when focused on specific skills for supporting their children's academic progress and advocating for their children, enhances their sense of efficacy and in turn reinforces more active roles (Westat & Policy Studies Associates 2001; Epstein, Simon & Salinas 1997). Structured programs that train parents to navigate the public school system, understand academic standards, and effectively advocate for their children support effective parent engagement centered on academic achievement (Westat & Policy Studies Associates, 2001; Henderson 2010).

In addition to these entry points, schools that draw effectively on community organizations and community resources increase their odds of sustaining improvement. For effective community engagement that is responsive to local needs and makes full use of community assets, though, community organizations must be engaged in designing initiatives and shaping reforms from the beginning, with shared decision-making structures and continuous learning between partners (Blank, Melaville & Shah 2003). Organized community groups like those that have pressed the Obama administration for more transparency and more flexibility – many of which have long track records of supporting improvement in local schools – are ready to support turnaround schools in their communities. But they have too often been shut out of the process by its hastiness and the rigidity of federal models.

## PRIORITIZING ENGAGEMENT IN THE NEXT FOUR YEARS

As noted above, there are hopeful signs that the DOE is developing a stronger appreciation for the role of families and community in supporting school improvement. Most recently, in December 2012 the DOE released a new framework for family engagement drafted by Karen Mapp (2012), a prominent family engagement expert. This framework is solidly grounded in research and practice and emphasizes capacity building for districts, schools, and families. It calls for sustained investment in strengthening home-school partnerships and for schools and districts to treat engagement as a core strategy for school improvement. It emphasizes helping families take an active role in schools, building families' and educators' sense of efficacy through skill development, and creating multiple opportunities and invitations for engagement. Mapp grounds home-school partnership in relational trust and shared decision-making.

This new framework would provide an excellent basis for re-casting family and community engagement as a core priority in federal school turnaround policies. The DOE is poised to move beyond lip service to true engagement. Once the framework has been finalized, the DOE can use it to revisit SIG, ESEA waivers, and other policies governing school turnarounds. Dedicated funding for programs to build educators' and families' knowledge and skills, coupled with real expectations of states and districts to treat engagement seriously, would go a long way toward rooting federal turnaround policy in research.

The DOE should also take care to avoid undermining its own forward progress on valuing engagement. The SIG and ESEA waiver guidance makes reasonable and useful demands on states and districts to engage families in shaping school turnaround. But those demands are rendered moot when states and

districts are held to frantic timelines for implementing rigidly defined models. Community needs assessment and asset mapping, building organized parent groups, and drawing on community organizations to provide wraparound services, as the DOE has called for in its guidance, are excellent strategies for sparking broader community engagement. But they are hollow when communities have neither the time, nor the space, to help shape turnarounds.

Family and community engagement is a proven strategy for strengthening schools. The U.S. Department of Education would do well to approach community engagement with as much thoughtfulness and investment as compliance with turnaround models (which have more tenuous connections to research on school improvement). Mapp's new framework is an excellent model for a fresh start.

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## IN THE FIELD | THE LOGAN SQUARE NEIGHBORHOOD ASSOCIATION

Since 1962, the Logan Square Neighborhood Association (LSNA) has convened and organized local residents, institutions, faith communities, businesses, and social service agencies to strengthen and empower the Logan Square neighborhood of Chicago. In the early 1990s, LSNA formed an education committee to support and strengthen local public schools and organized families, teachers, and principals around a campaign that opened five elementary school annexes and two new middle schools to relieve severe overcrowding in local schools.

With the principal and bilingual coordinator at one elementary school, LSNA created a parent mentor program that trains mothers, mainly immigrants, as paid classroom assistants, while also providing leadership development training and a welcoming community. The parent mentor program has spread to seven additional schools, and more than 1,300 parents have graduated from the program. Drawing on their relationships with school staff, knowledge of schools' and families' needs, and leadership training, parent mentors lead family engagement activities and have launched many new programs to deepen home-school connections, including the creation of six Twenty-First Century Community Learning Centers (CLCs). LSNA's CLCs provide academics, social activities, and arts and sports classes to children and adults alike, many taught by parents and community members. The CLCs draw families into school buildings, provide a sense of ownership and community connection, and help transform schools into centers of community life.

LSNA continues to develop new ways of forging connections between families, communities, and schools. They have trained parents as literacy ambassadors, who team up with teachers to conduct home visits; launched an extended-day and wraparound service model at a local middle school; and developed a university partnership that allows parents and residents to pursue full certification as bilingual teachers and that was the model for statewide teacher pipeline legislation. LSNA's work has transformed schools into hubs of community activity and laid a foundation for meaningful family partnership.

*For more on the Logan Square Neighborhood Association, see [www.lсна.net](http://www.lсна.net).*