

THE ROLES OF PARENT and COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT in STUDENT SUCCESS:

What Works in Illinois



SUMMARY of a LISTENING TOUR ACROSS ILLINOIS

CONVENED BY:

FEDERATION FOR COMMUNITY SCHOOLS
ADVANCE ILLINOIS
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THE ROLES OF COMMUNITY AND PARENT ENGAGEMENT IN STUDENT SUCCESS:

WHAT WORKS IN ILLINOIS

A significant body of research exists affirming the important role parents play in their children's academic success and underscoring the importance of parental/family engagement with schools. Significant research, too, has been conducted on the impact of community engagement with schools, and the ways in which school/community partnerships can meet student needs and drive student achievement.

The ability to cite research into parent and community engagement strategies and practices and the ability to create an engagement-centered school, built upon successful and sustainable parent/community engagement strategies, that reap the benefits of strong engagement practices are very different things. This document outlines learnings from discussions about what works "on the ground" in urban, rural, and suburban communities across Illinois. Participants ranged from district superintendents and school leadership to parents and community members, and conversations took place in Peoria, Chicago, DeKalb/Sycamore, Decatur, Springfield and Carbondale. Convened jointly by the Federation for Community Schools, Advance Illinois, Voices for Illinois Children, Illinois PTA, and the Illinois P-20 Council's Family and Youth Engagement Subcommittee, the conversations yielded a wealth of information about translating research into best practices at the school and community level, and the barriers to putting ideas into action.

STRATEGIES AND PRACTICES: COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

Why is community engagement important?

Participants expressed the view that, at its most fundamental level, community engagement is important because children and **YOUNG PEOPLE NEED TO FEEL AS THOUGH SOMEONE CARES** about them - they need to feel supported by and understood by adults (including but not limited to their

parents, other family members, and their teachers). When children and young people see adults working together on students' behalves, they feel supported, valued, and included in the broader community. Community engagement also provides opportunities for young people to make positive impacts on their own communities, and develop self-confidence and self-efficacy as a result.



Across each of the communities, some common elements emerged. In the area of community engagement with schools, people in each community valued community engagement because of the potential it has to **BRING ADDITIONAL RESOURCES** (i.e., volunteers, in-kind donations, etc.) into the schools. Another common view about community engagement centers on the opportunity for community members to "give back" and mentor young people in their communities.

Along those lines, community engagement offers opportunities for adults and students to work together to **DEVELOP YOUTH ASSETS** - adults have the opportunity to engage children and young people in ways that develop self-confidence, build young people up, engage and empower them, and help prepare students for success in school and life beyond school. Several participants in the DeKalb session, for example, felt as though community engagement with and support of students helped change the world, one child at a time, and that supporting children and young people was the responsibility of all community members.



CASE STUDY: COMMUNITY SCHOOL ADVISORY BOARDS

Shared leadership and community ownership are both crucial to developing and sustaining community schools, and the advisory board is the infrastructure for those practices in a community school. The community school advisory board is a diverse stakeholder group organized to oversee the transition of a traditional school to a community school and the development and sustainability of the community school.

The advisory board is often convened by the school and (if applicable) the school's lead partner agency. Conveners seek to bring a diverse range of experiences, perspectives and areas of expertise together on the advisory board, so the group can develop a comprehensive understanding of student and family needs and available resources. It is also important that the advisory board conveners provide clear information about the expectations of participation, for example meeting commitments and outreach expectations.

The advisory board is initially a planning team, responsible for developing the plan for implementing programs that will **1. meet identified stakeholder needs, and 2. create learning and support opportunities in the school beyond the traditional school day.**

Advisory boards play a critical role in parent and community engagement, both in terms of having parents and community members on the actual board itself but also in terms of program creation, identification of and creation of access to critical resources and supports, and establishing a culture of shared leadership and openness.

The role of the school

The creation of community engagement pathways are the responsibility of both the community and the school. It is important for the school to reach out into the community to identify resources and programs, to engage community partners and individuals, to create a volunteer program, and to foster all different types of engagement. For example, Parsons Elementary School in Decatur, Illinois has a strong relationship with First Christian Church and its Club 350. Club 350 provides a variety of different supports for students and families, ranging from out-of-school time tutoring and learning programs to mentorship to volunteer "person-hours." Other community partners provide parent liaisons to build relationships between the school and families, and a Parent Coffee House provides a space and time for parents to come together, learn from each other, support each other, and come to see the school as a welcoming, supportive environment. In other words, at Parsons there are all different levels of/types of engagement for all different types of community members.

This does not happen by accident, and it is not a result of community partners "cold calling" the school, offering programs and supports. Rather, the principal and teachers at Parsons have reached out to the community - asking for support, outlining student/family needs, creating **PARTNERSHIPS AND COLLABORATION** with community-based organizations, and creating an environment in which community partners feel valued, and also supported themselves. The school leadership's willingness to listen, consider, investigate, and engage is critical, and extends to all levels within a district and a community.

This is also a key element of successful community engagement - at Parsons and similar schools, programs are intentional and meaningful to both students/families and to the volunteers and community partners providing the programs. In other words in order for engagement strategies to be effective and purposeful, all stakeholders need to feel as though they are a part of the school, and that they each have an important role to play. Parsons functions, in effect, as a community school, for which community engagement is critical to Parsons accomplishing its goals of preparing students for academic and personal success.

Just as schools have a role to play in strong community engagement, so too do community-based partner organizations, and in a variety of different ways. Their power to impact student achievement and development, however, can be limited by school-related barriers. Several of the examples outlined above feature community-based organizations providing programs and supports directly in schools. This requires that the school and school district be open to having community-based partners in the school, welcome school-based

programs and supports, and value partnership with community-based organizations. In Pleasant Plains, for example, it is a district-wide priority that the schools be open to partners, parents, and community members. This also means that community-based organizations work in partnership with schools to identify needs, put in place supports to meet those needs, evaluate the success or impact of different programs, and make adjustments as necessary. It requires transparency on the part of community-based organizations, and a willingness to share information and work together, moving away from what one participant called “program provider turf wars.”

The role of the community-based organizations/partners.

Community-based organizations foster engagement in a variety of different ways. Some bring resources to bear on challenges that students face while others develop the capacity for parents to be involved with schools. In some instances, community-based organizations that advocate for families and develop families' capacities to advocate for themselves also add another layer of accountability for schools and school districts in terms of being open to families, working to meet family needs, and promoting engagement. For example, Old Kings Orchard community center has developed a Parent Union which works to build parents'

Three examples from the Full-Service Community School initiative in Peoria also shine a light on the role that community members can play in supporting student learning. Manual High School has career academies that enjoy community support. Local businesses and organizations provide students with career information, work with staff around workforce readiness curricula and programs, and offer job shadowing and other hands-on career learning opportunities. In addition, Manual hosts quarterly Academic Progress Conferences which bring together local community members (of all different ages) with students to go over each student's academic progress report. This serves to demonstrate for students that adults in the community care about their success, and also creates relationships between students and positive adults in their communities.

Also in Peoria, Trewyn Middle School's recent College Month brought together Bradley University faculty and students with Trewyn students and parents to discuss post high school options. Of particular note in Trewyn's example is the role that institutions of higher education have to play in supporting K-12 academic achievement. In Peoria, Bradley University is the lead partner for the district's full-service community school work, and also engages with schools across the city to provide access to the resources that the University offers. In Chicago, Columbia College, DePaul University, the

KEY LEARNINGS

- Schools' openness to community partners and willingness to host co-located programs and services are critical.
- Reaching out to the community both to share resources that the school can offer and to identify community-based supports from which students and families can benefit are two key school roles.
- Intentionality, consistency, and varied pathways support strong community engagement.

capacities to engage with schools and to be strong advocates for their children. The Union values shared decision making and opportunities for “every voice to be heard,” and works with schools to make sure parents have opportunities to engage in leadership and shared decision making.

University of Illinois at Chicago, and the University of Chicago all play critical roles in individual schools, clusters of schools, and the entire district, ranging from providing training and professional development for teachers and principals to acting as a lead partner agency for a cohort of community schools

identified several pathways for overcoming these obstacles. Some participants recommended “expanding out” the area that schools typically consider to be part of their communities - in other words, looking beyond the immediate community to identify organizations that could provide programs and/or supports to students and families. Community schools do this work through a dedicated resource coordinator, whose job it is to work with stakeholders to identify student and family needs, and to work with the community to identify and make readily accessible (usually at the school) resources to meet these needs. Other participants recommended creating thinking teams comprised of school staff, parents, and community members to talk through community challenges and work together to identify possible solutions, using the school as a “safe space” in which to have these conversations.

In the same vein, community-based organizations have an opportunity (or obligation, as some might say) to reach out to schools to ensure that students and families have access to community-level and other supports that serve to meet their basic needs. The school oftentimes serves as a “staging ground” for the provision of resources and supports (as in the case of community schools), working with community partners to tap into otherwise un-or-under-accessed supports. This requires willingness on the part of the community-based organizations to share resources and think collaboratively about the provision of supports and services. In other words, they must collaborate with other partners to do what’s best for children and families.

In addition to socio-economic factors, participants in several communities cited community-level unity

and/or discord as challenges to meaningful, sustained community engagement. Community-based organizations have a role to play in convening different groups from across the community and facilitating the difficult conversations it takes to create unity around a common vision and common goals for shared futures.

Parameters around blending funding streams, using certain funding streams for a very limited set of activities, and silos that exist around different state and city-level departments also pose challenges to the work, according to participants in each community involved in the listening tour. Breaking down silos around departments and funding are critical to parent and community engagement. At the community level, community-based organizations and schools are working to **BREAK DOWN THE SILOS** that traditionally exist between the two. For example, Decatur’s Old Kings Orchard community center demonstrates how community centers can build relationships with schools that serve to support learning. By working with the schools from which the center draws program participants, Old Kings Orchard staff have developed out of school time programs linked directly and meaningfully to classroom learning (something that research has demonstrated time and time again is critical to student academic improvement and success).

The role of the broader community

In addition to direct school/community-based organization linkages and community members’ volunteerism, the **BROADER COMMUNITY ALSO PLAYS A ROLE** in successful community engagement with schools. Cross-community learning councils such as the Decatur Area Education

KEY LEARNINGS

- Community-based organizations need to let go of the “turf wars” and break down the silos among them that sometimes characterize the way they try to work together.
- Community-based organizations have a role to play in building parents’ and community members’ capacities to

advocate for themselves and their children with schools.

- Facilitating conversations around difficult topics that can serve to break down barriers among schools, families and communities can be a crucial role for community-based organizations.



CASE STUDY: THE DECATUR AREA EDUCATION COALITION

Coalition and Springfield's Continuum of Learning create community-wide "children's cabinets" or P-20 Councils focused on working together to drive student achievement and success. Community members, business leaders, civic leaders, educators, district leadership and parents all participate on these community-wide councils - some of whom may directly engage with individual schools and some of whom may not, but through their work on these councils all are engaged in and supporting positive academic and developmental outcomes for their communities' children and young people.

Another example of the larger community's role in supporting schools is maximizing opportunities to have community leaders reinforce for parents and community members how important they are to student success and to the schools in their communities. This strategy - having this message shared across the community by civic leaders, religious leaders, and other community "influencers" - has made a big impact in DeKalb and other communities. In Addison Trails, for example, parent and adult participation in the high school's English Language Learning classes hinged on support from local business leaders, community leaders, and religious leaders. Having trusted members of the community put a value on and share information about family and community engagement in schools serves to drive sustained and meaningful participation and the creation of strong partnerships among schools, communities and families.

When the community comes together across sectors working towards common goals, change is possible. In the Harvard Park area of East Springfield, community, school, district, and parent stakeholders worked together to put forward a Promise Neighborhood planning grant application. The proposal centered on a "whole-family" approach to meeting needs, strengthening the community, and driving student achievement.

The team proposed employing a system of care approach to ensure that student needs are truly met and as a way to **ORGANIZE AND COORDINATE RESOURCES, SYSTEMS, AND PARTNERSHIPS**. The work included both asset mapping and needs assessments, and used the school as the anchor for all of this work and for meeting student and family needs (the school at the center would be a community school, in other words). In spite of not being awarded a Promise Zone planning grant, the Harvard Park group is moving forward with their plans, and are also looking at scaling up their work and replicating it in other parts of Springfield. This work demands - and in Springfield has - the support, involvement, participation, and "skin in the game" from all different partners across the community. When these partners work together as they do in Springfield, a great deal of change is possible.

The Decatur Area Education Coalition is an example of strong, cross-sector community engagement with schools and the school district. Convened by the Community Foundation of Decatur/Macon County, the Coalition's goal is to work together to address the challenges that the school district and individual schools face in preparing students for success in school, in post-secondary education, and in the world of work. The Coalition aims to create "the most educated community in the state" in Decatur and Macon Counties and has representation from different sectors of the community, including employers, the school district and community-based organizations.

The Coalition accomplishes its work through three working teams that each address a high priority of education reform/support need - early childhood, Kindergarten readiness and the transition into elementary school; meeting the needs of 3rd through 8th graders, and; preparing high school students for college and the world of work. Each working group has its own goal, but each also uses common processes to work towards achieving those goals: identifying the problem using data; identifying ways to address the problem using best practices, creativity, data, and assets from across the community; being solution focused and keeping everyone's eye on the shared vision of doing what's best for the children of Decatur; using data to track progress and refine strategies; and sharing outcomes, lessons learned, and successes broadly so as to inform work in other parts of the Coalition and throughout the community.

The Decatur Area Education Coalition's work is serving as a model for similar coalitions across the state, and can serve as a best practice to advise cross-sector initiatives in communities across the country.

STRATEGIES AND PRACTICES: PARENT/FAMILY ENGAGEMENT

Defining “parent”

Often times, people involved in education and with schools seem to use the term “parent” as a catch-all, referring not just to biological parents and/or “traditional” family structures, but referring also to caregiving adults in a children’s lives (i.e., grandparents, guardians, foster parents, older siblings). It is important to intentionally frame a conversation around parent engagement to include **FAMILY** engagement. Although educators, community partners, and others do not intend

Key questions that communities struggle to answer center on both defining parent/family engagement and on measuring it. This year, the University of Chicago researchers identified parental engagement as one of the five essential supports for lasting school improvement. Earlier, Dr. Joyce Epstein and her team (Johns Hopkins University Center for School, Family and Community Partnerships) also highlighted the importance of family and parental engagement and identified six strategies that schools can use to work with parents and families to create meaningful engagement. Dr. Epstein’s work recognizes that parental engagement occurs in a variety of ways, based to some

KEY LEARNINGS

- Cross-community learning, education and youth development councils, such as the Decatur Area Education Coalition and KEYS in DeKalb, bring the broader community together and working towards common goals of student, family, school and community success.
- Civic, political, and religious leaders can serve in their capacities to reinforce the importance of community (and family) engagement with schools, and build bridges between community members and schools.

to exclude “non-parents” from engagement strategies and opportunities, often the perception of care-giving adults who fall outside the traditional definition of “parent” is that the efforts undertaken and labeled “parent engagement” or “parent outreach” do not apply to or include them, as non-traditional parents and/or caregivers. Through the course of this paper and through the conversations had across the state about engagement, the intent of using “parent engagement” was not to exclude, leave unacknowledged, or ignore non-parent caregiving adults, but rather as a “catch-all” phrase, with a definition that extends beyond the traditional definition of parent.

Defining parent/family engagement

In order to identify strong, impactful parent/family engagement strategies, an operational definition of parent engagement needs to be shared among all stakeholders. This, as evidenced by comments in each and every community, poses a big challenge.

degree on parent capacity, interest, and availability, and to some degree on school willingness.

In DeKalb, a community member gave an example of a strong parent/family engagement program - the program centered on hosting parent information nights to share resources that adults can use to support students’ literacy development. Although this is a great example of providing parents with the information that they need to be partners in their children’s educations, another community member pointed out that many parents simply cannot attend events at the school. Parents face multiple challenges to “walking through those doors” ranging from needing to work multiple jobs to caring for family members at home. But these same parents who may not attend meetings or volunteer at the school may have also created a strong “home learning environment” and make sure that every day their children are at school on-time and ready to learn. The question arose of how to quantify those parents as “engaged parents” and how to expand commonly-held definitions of



engagement beyond parents' presence in the school.

Along those lines, a participant - from the school district - in the Springfield session raised the point that a parent willing to have a frank conversation with a teacher about his or her child's behavior is an engaged parent. Engagement - and the relationships necessary to foster it - can also be built on shared work around difficult topics. Parent engagement practitioners and researchers have also started voicing the view that a parent who engages in conversations about and works with school staff to develop solutions to a child's negative behavior is a partner in his or her child's education, and that engagement must be recognized and built upon. Similarly, participants in several communities referred to specific examples of families and teachers coming together around difficult issues, and how working through those situations led to a strong bond between parents and teachers. In a similar vein, schools providing access to necessary supports - especially at the point-of-need and/or during a crisis - serves to strengthen families' bonds with the school, which, in turn, fosters engagement over time.

A parent in Carbondale, when talking about her own involvement with her children's schools, said "engagement begets engagement." At her children's schools other parents modeled engagement in a variety of ways, including attending and encouraging other parents to attend parent meetings and curriculum nights, volunteering and encouraging other parents to volunteer at the school, and utilizing and sharing information about the resources available at the school, especially in the Parent Information Resource Center. The parent who spoke felt that seeing and hearing from other parents engaged in different activities at and with the school created pathways for her to get engaged, as well, and modeled for her the different capacities she could develop to be a partner in her children's educations.

According to people in communities across Illinois, **TEAMWORK** - among teachers, staff, leaders, and parents - **IS A CRITICAL ELEMENT OF ENGAGEMENT.** It takes a team effort, or a "village," to create an environment in which children succeed. Beyond just working together, everyone also needs to be on the same page about their goals for students and for the school. As one participant in Carbondale said, when families and teachers work together effectively, they encourage and support each other to create positive outcomes for students. This type of cooperation takes work to build - it depends on relationships, mutual trust, clear communications, and a shared vision for student success.

Strong engagement also requires that school leadership, teachers and parents all know the importance of family/parent engagement, have the capacities to engage with and work with each other, and value each others' contribu-

EPSTEIN'S SIX TYPES OF PARENT INVOLVEMENT

1. COMMUNICATING -

the school provides means for, participates in, and expects two-way communication between the school and home;

2. PARENTING -

providing supports that develop the skills adults need to effectively parent and to serve as advocates for their children;

3. LEARNING AT HOME -

how schools can work with parents to create a respect for learning and an environment that prioritizes learning for their children in their homes;

4. VOLUNTEERING -

providing consistent, concrete opportunities for parents to support the school and its students by volunteering and increasing the number of caring adults in the child's learning environment;

5. DECISION-MAKING

creating opportunities to include parents in decision making and school leadership, especially on decisions that impact students and families, and:

6. COLLABORATING

with the community the school builds community partnerships that provide services that support student and family development and address challenges that families are facing.

tions and assets. One participant in DeKalb especially emphasized how important it is for schools to maximize parents' strengths, and reinforced how critical valuing parents' assets is to parents themselves feeling acknowledged and included by the school.

ASSUMPTIONS THAT PEOPLE HOLD ABOUT EACH OTHER AND ABOUT OTHER GROUPS FORM THE BIGGEST BARRIERS TO FAMILY ENGAGEMENT.

Parents feel that teachers hold unfair assumptions about them, and teachers expressed feeling as though the reverse is true. As a community member in Decatur pointed out, it is easy for people to assume the "worst case scenario" or their one worst experience with someone is emblematic of the entire group. Participants in DeKalb, Decatur, and Carbondale all discussed the "assumptions barrier" and identified strong communication among all stakeholders and doing the work it takes to develop mutually trusting relationships as keys to overcoming the assumptions barrier.

In Peoria, much of the conversation centered on the leadership characteristics necessary to foster meaningful engagement. The principals at the table all felt as though modeling engagement, listening to parents, creating pathways for families to engage with them and with school staff, working to meet the needs of their families, and working to connect with each parent individually are core components of their roles as effective leaders. They also felt as though modeling these behaviors for their staff is critical to successful engagement - and to student success.

Role of the schools(s)

Obviously, schools play a critical role in fostering, developing pathways for, and sustaining meaningful family engagement. A common "role of the school" comment across all the communities was the need for schools to develop consistent, effective communication channels through which to share information with and get feedback from

parents. Participants also expressed that schools need to be ready to rely on parents' expertise, welcome their expertise, and rely on parents' assets to help drive student achievement. In other words (or, more pointedly, in the words of a participant in DeKalb) schools need to "walk the walk." It's not enough to say that they want to engage families. Schools need to do what it takes - create multiple pathways for information sharing, create an open and welcoming environment for parents and community partners, make sure parents know what's expected of them as partners in their

children's educations, and provide the tools necessary to develop that capacity, and honoring the contributions that parents make.

TRUST WAS A RECURRING THEME

in conversations across Illinois. Interestingly, participants in each community felt as though potentially negative or

challenging conversations or experiences, conflict, and/or misunderstandings provided prime opportunities for building trust. Principals and leadership play key roles in using conflict or challenges to build trust - in three of the communities, participants referenced personal experiences they had with challenging situations, and cited that the way in which the principal and/or superintendent handled the conflict served to build trust in the school for parents. In other words, potentially negative experiences (i.e., a parent having to have a difficult conversation with teacher and principal around child's behavior, teacher's behavior, etc.) can be engagement opportunities and chances to start to build trust.

Again, SILOS AND A "THIS IS THE WAY THINGS HAVE ALWAYS BEEN DONE" MENTALITY SERVE AS BARRIERS TO ENGAGEMENT.

As long as schools see themselves as separate from communities and families, and as long as these institutional barriers or silos remain, no meaningful engagement can take place and stakeholders will not be on the same page and able to work successfully together. "Walking the walk" also builds the trust between parents and





schools that is so critical to the development of lasting relationships.

One of the ways in which schools have broken down these silos and reached out to families and communities is through community-based outreach. In Decatur, several schools start the school year off with a bus tour of the community and home visits to students' families. Other school districts in the DeKalb area hold "kick off events," like family barbecues, linked to a series of parent/family events throughout the year. Some schools referenced neighborhood walks, and others talked about shared projects as ways to build relationships (for example, a superintendent in Springfield talked about the partnerships that came out of a group of parents and community members working to renovate a park adjacent to the school).

In some communities, **"STARTING EARLY" SERVES TO BREAK DOWN SILOS BEFORE THEY EVEN FORM**, and fosters relationships between schools and students. Decatur's Baby Talk program engages families while babies are still in utero, and Head Start employs a variety of strategies to engage parents in children's and their own learning and to develop parent-as-teacher capacities. Early childhood centers work with families to improve school readiness. Some districts work to keep that momentum going into elementary school, but the question of keeping that momentum through middle school and beyond came up time and again, without any clear answers...but with several best practices and strategies showing promise. Different strategies included family nights with academic focuses, parent empowerment opportunities, meaningful volunteer opportunities for adults/family members, and clear and high expectations for engagement.

Across the board, though, people felt as though one key way to keep the engagement momentum going through elementary school and middle school is to provide opportunities for parents to "model" what they want to see their kids engaged in - life-long learning opportunities for adults to model engagement with schools. Strategies included family academic programs and learning opportunities and schools providing supports to families to work with them to develop "home learning environments." One caveat is that in order for this to be effective, schools (and teachers) need to move away from the expectation that "parents know what to do and how to do it" and see that many parents need additional information/supports to help students learn, to establish home learning environments, and to be partners in their children's educations - though this does not necessarily mean that they don't care about their children's success.

Providing different pathways for engagement and involvement, coupled with support for families to take advantage of myriad opportunities, proved an effective strategy at some schools. For example, at Garfield Montessori

Magnet Charter School, parents are required to sign a contract promising to have ten hours of contact/give ten hours of time to the school. The school offers all different levels of engagement and types of activities from which family members can choose based on their skills, interests, and time. Different pathways honor the different assets that families bring to the table. The school espouses the philosophy that "every contact matters," and that parents don't need to be "anything other than what they are" to engage with the school and contribute to learning. Teachers "walk the walk" and engage parents as well - it's a whole-team approach.

Lastly, school administrators, district administrators, and community members in several different areas felt as though schools have a real responsibility to support families in crisis. One community member expressed the belief that schools need to "know what's out there," and need to be able to link families to resources, especially at times of need. At Garfield Elementary School, a full-service community school in Peoria, families see the school as a trusted resource and a safe space, especially in times of crisis

Feeling welcome - the creation of an engagement-focused environment

Every strategy, activity, and initiative outlined above depend almost entirely on the creation of an engagement-focused environment in schools. A school clerk in Carbondale distilled her thoughts on how/why parents are engaging with school into three general "categories:"

- To observe their children in the classroom
- To volunteer
- For a teacher conference

She focused on the last point, because it raised a

critical challenge for her as the first point of contact at the school for many parents: the question of how clearly schools are communicating both with teachers and families about conferences, and the discrepancy sometimes between "teacher policy" or preference and school policy. In other words, although school policy holds that all parent/teacher conferences will take place on a scheduled basis and not on a "drop-in basis," some teachers adhere strictly to that policy, some teachers adhere to that policy on a case-by-case basis, and some teachers make themselves available for conferences at the point of request. Several parents raised the complicating factor that, although the school spells out the policy in its handbook, many parents never receive the handbook.

The Carbondale school clerk felt one solution that would serve to both address the situation of a parent being turned away and that serves to start to create an engagement-centric environment is if **TEACHERS THEMSELVES COMMUNICATE THEIR PREFERENCES CLEARLY AND EARLY IN THE SCHOOL YEAR AND ALSO THAT THE SCHOOL HANDBOOK IS AVAILABLE FOR ALL**, accessible for all. It might also make sense to have the handbook available several times during the year and highlighted at parent meetings. Participants in Chicago also noted the challenge around ensuring all parents have access to timely, relevant, accurate information, and recommended that each school assign a **PARENT ADVOCATE** charged with explaining school policies and requirements to parents. In Rockford, the Haskell Elementary School PIRC Parent Resource Leader worked with the school staff and the principal to combine key handbook/policy information with a year-long calendar of events and important dates that featured student artwork as a way to make sure that families had handy access to different types of information.

The questions raised above also highlight another wrinkle in the process of building trust. People have expectations of each other sometimes based on accurate information and experience, and sometimes based on their own beliefs, views and/or assumptions. Even if school policy dictates that teachers do not have conferences with parents on a drop-in basis, if a parent has that expectation and is then turned away, he/she may not feel treated





fairly, supported, or valued. When teachers and parents develop a shared understanding of expectations, it helps to build relationships and to avoid having parents feel unwelcome, among other things.

The example above also highlights the need for consistent and accessible communications between schools and parents. Relationships between teachers and parents, parents' relationships with the school, and two-way communication all develop a shared culture within the school and among families. All these activities must be undertaken thoughtfully and with intentionality in order to create lasting culture change.

In order to build trust and relationships, and undertake the work necessary to create clear communications channels, parent engagement must be a priority for principals. In Chicago, participants stated that principals need to be willing to develop relationships with parents and should be held accountable for that aspect of their work, as well. In other words, participants recognized the fact that strong engagement is driven in large part through the principals, and in addition to providing the training necessary for school leaders to prioritize engagement and build relationships with parents, districts should also evaluate principals on their work towards strong family engagement.

A SCHOOL CULTURE OF SHARED LEADERSHIP AND SHARED DECISION MAKING SERVE TO CREATE AN ENGAGEMENT-FOCUSED ENVIRONMENT, one that also includes opportunities for advocacy on behalf of families and mentorship and support for parents to develop the capacity to advocate on their own behalves and those of their children. When schools create opportunities for parent leadership, embrace the recommendations of parent groups, empower teams like No Child Left Behind (NCLB) parent committees and community school advisory boards, and provide adult learning and mentorship programs, a welcoming, inclusive, and cooperative culture is created.

Having said that, in Chicago some participants raised concerns about the effectiveness of some NCLB parent groups. Although the intent of NCLB parent involvement groups is positive, the implementation is too subjective based on school leadership, and on the leadership of the committee itself. Participants also stated that some schools had NCLB parent groups that "know what needs to be done" to engage more parents and impact students' academic experiences, but these groups often fall short of the funds needed to accomplish their work. Compounding the frustration these groups feel about the limited funds available to accomplish their goals is the fact that oftentimes neighboring schools do not have as high-functioning NCLB parent groups, and for a variety of reasons have not used their allocated funds effectively or strategically. Participants cited as another challenge with the NCLB parent involvement group program the

THE NATIONAL PTA'S "THREE FOR ME"

is great example of providing multiple pathways to engagement. **Three for Me** provides a program that schools can implement to engage a broad range of and number of parents in volunteer opportunities by outlining a variety of ways parents can give three hours to their children's schools (ranging from spending three hours volunteering in the classroom to home-based activities that parents can undertake). Along the same lines, Chicago's Netfelhorst Elementary School has as a requirement that all parents to do something in, for, or with the school for ten hours across the school year. In order to maximize participation, the school provides multiple pathways for parents to undertake their ten hours, and school administrators have found that very few parents stop their involvement once they've hit the ten hour mark.

lack of buy-in or support by some principals. In the cases in which principals do not necessarily want to engage parents or the community, they tend to populate the NCLB parent committee with “yes people” who will guide the committee towards the principals' own agendas, rather than developing meaningful parent supports and outreach.

In addition to larger, school-climate change efforts that create a welcoming, engagement-centric environment, smaller steps help, as well. Some elements of the PIRC work in Illinois underscores some basic steps that schools can take to create welcoming environments. For example, greeting parents (and others) warmly at the main office or through the intercom, creating clearly-defined and accessible parent-specific areas of the school (even if it's just a library shelf with parent information and resources), hosting parent information sessions and adult learning opportunities and clear, consistent communications all contribute in meaningful ways to developing a “welcoming school.” Again, being a resource to parents and families - whether through the provision of the types of supports, activities, and learning offered by the

PIRCs or through the linking of families in crisis to resources - also fosters an engagement-focused environment.

Role of the school district

In each of the communities, one key role of the school district resonated throughout all of the discussions: hiring the right leadership and providing training to district and school leaders and school staff are crucial to successful engagement strategies in any district. From the Superintendent down through the schools' staff, participants shared that **WHEN LEADERSHIP PRIORITIZED ENGAGEMENT, understood the value of engagement, and incorporated engagement into district and school strategies, then engagement was much more likely to be valued at the school level, and EFFORTS WERE MUCH MORE LIKELY TO BE SUCCESSFUL.**

This applies to school leadership as well. In Peoria, one constant across the elementary, middle, and high school full-service community schools was that each principal put a high value on engaging and supporting parents and families and on creating strong ties to the community. As such, although the

KEY LEARNINGS

- The first step towards creating meaningful, sustained parental engagement is the creation of welcoming environment.
- Teamwork among all stakeholders in children's academic success - parents, teachers, school leaders, and community members - is critical.
- Assumptions that people hold about each other and about other groups form the biggest barriers to family engagement. Bringing groups together to conquer a shared challenge, complete a shared project, or work towards shared goals can break down and change assumptions.
- Principals need to model engagement for teachers by listening to and valuing parents, creating pathways for shared communication, and working to meet the needs of parents.
- The importance of trust among all stakeholders and between parents and teachers cannot be overstated.
- Smaller initial steps and starting engagement initiatives early - while children are in pre-school or younger - can serve to building meaningful engagement into the elementary school years and beyond.
- Schools can and should create multiple pathways through parents can engage and identify multiple ways to share information with and get feedback from parents.

CASE STUDY: SPRINGFIELD'S FACE TEAMS

In Springfield, the school district has implemented a strategy to engage families through Family and Community Engagement Teams (FACE) teams. FACE teams include representatives from the school, parent coordinators, and family engagement/parent education coordinators, as well as school leadership. Input and information from families and community partners also serve to guide the FACE team's work and their program development.

Among other activities, FACE teams work to create programs that serve to support parents and families. For example, in one school, the FACE team is working with the literacy coach to train mentors to work with parents around reading with and undertaking literacy activities with children and measuring and tracking outcomes and progress against literacy goals.

FACE teams also relies on the expertise of its parents. For example, the team may work with school staff to organize a Math Extreme Makeover Family Night to work with parents on supporting their children's math skill mastery, relying on parents who use math do to their jobs to lead activities.

The FACE team work undertaken at each school varies due to several different factors. First, each team structures its activities around the learning goals that the school has for its students and the specific needs of the parents and students that the school serves. Second, principal support is key. One FACE team lead stated that the ability of her team to accomplish its goals depended on principal leadership and buy-in, and without the principal's support of and value of the FACE team and its work, she did not feel as though her team would have been as successful in engaging parents and meeting family needs as they had been thus far. The reverse is also true - without principal support and buy-in, the FACE team's efficacy diminishes.

Another barrier is the difference between the district leadership, vision, and direction and how it's translated into action at different schools. The district has put a priority on and resources behind the FACE teams, but school leaders must do the same in order for the work to be as successful as it can be.

strategies used in each school varied, each school is a welcoming, open and supportive place for families, and a valued partner for community-based organizations.

This leads to a critical school district role - **HIRING THE RIGHT LEADERS**. Because leadership's ability to engage families and community members and prioritizing of such engagement are both critical to the successful implementation and sustainability of engagement strategies, school boards and communities need to choose leaders for their schools (and district initiative) that possess these necessary characteristics. This requires, also, visionary leadership at the school district level - in the superintendent's office, certainly, but also throughout the district. This, in turn, requires that states and the Federal government put in place strategies, processes, and trainings that develop the visionary leaders that districts need to drive engagement throughout their communities.

In Springfield, one participant also made the point that **DISTRICTS HAVE A "PUBLIC RELATIONS ROLE"** to play to ensure that parents and community members know they are valued and understand that they are critical to school and student success. This public relations role can also serve to present a "united front" and convey a commitment to all working together (breaking down silos) towards student success. The Springfield speaker went on to say that parents sometimes feel like it's the "blame game" - that a great deal of credit for students' success or blame for lack thereof is placed squarely on parents. She cited a recent article on parent engagement in the local paper that focused on parental disengagement, and that she felt it demeaned parents and undermined their role in student success. She suggested that the school district could have authored a letter to the editor from the district about how important parents are to the district's success. This would have served to remind the broader community that schools and parents do work together on children's behalves and demonstrated publicly the district's support of parents. Since the "blame game" seems to be a popular motive for the mainstream media, this is a lesson that can serve other superintendents and district leaders, as well.

One of the issues that also came out in Springfield (but which is applicable to districts across the state) was that different districts have different challenges around engagement efforts. Some districts serve students who come from very challenged communities and these schools often need to work to meet students' and families' basic needs before they can focus on engagement. Other districts serve communities where most of the population's basic needs are met. One such district superintendent reported being "overwhelmed by requests" from parents asking to volunteer, to participate in shared leadership, to visit the school and other similar requests.

Other superintendents preside over districts with limited resources or opportunities for engagement, which brings with it its own set of issues (being overwhelmed by requests to offer support didn't seem to be one).

In two communities, participants raised **CHALLENGES AROUND HOW DISTRICTS AND/OR SCHOOLS USE TITLE I FUNDS.** The current Title I

structures do provide opportunities to engage parents in shared decision making, but whether or not districts and/or schools maximize or put value on shared decision making is a different matter. Parents sometimes feel as though "someone else is deciding" without their input,

and don't feel empowered, and are therefore much less likely to engage in/with the school, especially around supports offered through Title I funding/work. Along those lines, parents, school staff, and representatives from community-based organizations all underscored the importance of having a parent coordinator, a family outreach director, a resource coordinator, etc. whose role it is to bridge gaps among stakeholders, bring everyone to the table, and drive the work of the engagement/relationship building process. Some districts do use their Title I funds to put in place just such a "human resource," while others do not.

In Chicago, participants had specific ideas around other uses for Title I funds. Linked to developing parents' advocacy capacities, the Chicago group recommended that Title I and other funding streams geared towards supporting parent engagement be used to provide parent leadership training, parent advocacy development training, and shared leadership training to teach parents and empower parents to lead.

The **CONSISTENT, CLEAR COMMUNICATION** of timely and useful information is another key role the school district - and the schools - play in engaging parents as partners in children's educations. "Arming" parents with the information, resources, and tools that they need to engage in and support their children's learning is critical. One of the Head Start

programs in Decatur, for example, provides information, tools, and capacity building for families around reading with young children as a way to establish family literacy habits early, and works with parents to understand their role as a child's "first and strongest" teacher. Also in Decatur, the school district organizes a Parent University designed to prepare parents to support student learning on

subjects ranging from standardized tests to high school statistics courses, and at all learning/grade levels. The district also provides parents with data about student progress and possible stumbling blocks, which is linked to tools that parents can use to work with their children to

overcome academic challenges.

In DeKalb and Carbondale, participants talked about the tools that the districts and schools provide families around new math strategies and learning goals. Carbondale parents talked about the **CURRICULUM INFORMATION NIGHTS** that the district organizes in each school as being informative, helpful, and impactful. Parents felt as though these nights "armed" them with the information they needed to support their children achieving academic goals. Parents also suggested that districts hold more of these sessions, and look for ways to make the sessions as accessible as possible to all parents (i.e., providing translations of materials and meetings, holding the same sessions at several different times and/or at several different locations). Some parents also asked that districts provide "differentiated instruction" and support for parents of gifted children and children who need more remediation.

Districts can also play a celebratory role of sorts by honoring and celebrating parents doing what they need to be doing, recognizing students' achievements and schools' achievements, and highlighting successful programs comprise other strategies that districts (as well as individual schools). Such efforts go a long way in supporting families, building relationships, and creating a sense of teamwork.



Participants in Springfield highlighted a couple of initiatives underway in the area, including congratulatory and/or “honoring participation” notes sent home from the district to families of students who participated in a wide range of school-related activities and programs.

District officials' **WILLINGNESS TO LISTEN** to concerns and make responsive policy changes also contributes to fostering engagement at the school level. Two examples emerged from Springfield. First, a parent participant lauded her district's superintendent for how he handled a school-bus-safety concern raised by a parent. The superintendent responded by going out to the bus-stop location and investigating the concern, asking questions about possible solutions, and working with his team to change the route slightly to address the concern. The Springfield parent felt that this went far in reminding parents (or informing them) that the superintendent cares about their concerns, cares about their children, and is willing to listen, investigate, and address issues.

Related to a **WILLINGNESS TO CHANGE**, district policies themselves also can be barriers to engagement, information/resource sharing and relationship building. Policies prohibiting or putting strict parameters around schools being open to community partners,



school space being used for partner-sponsored activities, and being open to parents were all cited as huge barriers to any kind of engagement and serve to limit (in some cases drastically) the supports that schools can provide students and families. When school districts are willing to change a policy, for example, that would bar school computer use

during a science night for parents so that parents can access the information and tools they need to support student learning serve to again create a “we are all in this together” kind of climate in the school and district, and demonstrate the district's willingness to listen to and respond to parents.

Role of parents and families

As the listening tour highlighted again and again, engagement is a two-way street, and parents and families need to do their part to engage as partners with schools and in students' educations. Willingly providing their expertise is one way that parents can work towards engagement. **PARENTS ARE EXPERTS ON THEIR CHILDREN** and in many cases schools could use that expertise.

A parent in DeKalb gave an example of how her son's teacher called home to let the parent know her child was laughing in class and that the teacher found it to be disruptive. The parent knew that her son engaged in nervous laughter when he was anxious, didn't think he knew the answer, or was just uncomfortable. The parent's **WILLINGNESS TO HAVE A CONVERSATION** about this seemingly-behavioral issue, to share her knowledge about her child, to work with the teacher to develop some solutions, and to work with her son to develop other coping

CORE BELIEFS AND SHARED CULTURE

In each of the communities, a shared set of beliefs and a shared vision serve to guide the work and provide the cornerstones for the successful initiatives, strategies, and programs highlighted in this report.

For example, the work underway in Decatur reflects a shared vision of student success, a shared vision of community responsibility and accountability for supporting children (“we're all in together”) and shared values around education. Some of the other shared beliefs articulated included:

- Family and community engagement in schools and with students are critical to student success and to achieving their mission of becoming the most educated community in Illinois.
- “School isn't just for children; it's for parents and the community, too.”
- The first step in creating change is recognizing the problem.
- “We always go back to doing what's best for the children - we are all in this for the kids.”

The work underway in DeKalb reflects a shared vision of community responsibility and accountability for supporting children. Some of the other shared beliefs articulated included:

- “Everyone wants what's best for their children.”
- “We all have a shared responsibility for all of our children.”
- It takes engagement to build engagement - it's “contagious.”

Participants in Carbondale were guided by the belief that collectively they accomplish more when they work together, and a critical component of their abilities to work together, collaborate, and create lasting partnership is a strong, open, and clear communication structure.

strategies all helped forge a mutually beneficial relationship with the teacher. This is particularly salient because several parents in each session pointed out that they often feel as though the school “only calls with bad news,” so parents’ willingness to address those “bad news” phone calls and **COLLABORATE WITH TEACHERS TO COME TO WORKABLE SOLUTIONS** serves to build trust and cooperation between schools and families.

One of the **BARRIERS TO FAMILY ENGAGEMENT IS PARENTAL AND FAMILY ISOLATION**. This barrier took

case scenario’ of a disengaged (or worse) parent, and generalize from there. We need to see parents as partners, not as ‘problems.’”

These assumptions also cause levels of mistrust between families and schools, which serve to stifle engagement and stymie engagement strategies. As with teachers having a negative experience with one or two parents, a Springfield participant noted that for parents “it only takes one teacher to set the climate/give the impression that parents aren’t welcomed or valued.” Again, teacher preparation and

KEY LEARNINGS

- When leadership prioritize and value parent engagement, and incorporate it into strategies for districts and/or schools, engagement efforts at the school level are much more likely to be successful.
- Clear, consistent communications and using multiple strategies and structures to provide parents with the

information and tools that they need to be partners in children’s educations are critical.

- District leadership’s willingness to listen to and address parents’ concerns and a willingness to consider and change district policies also serve to foster engagement.

different forms in different communities. In some communities, desegregation rulings or open enrollment mean that families do not necessarily live near the schools their children attend, making it difficult for parents to participate in activities, and meetings convened at their children’s schools. Transportation posed a barrier in other communities, and in DeKalb one of the ways in which the community works to address this barrier is by holding school-related meetings (such as PTA meetings) at a central, neighborhood location.

THE ASSUMPTIONS THAT PEOPLE HOLD about each other formed another barrier to family engagement (and community engagement) common across the communities. To overcome this barrier, people in each community agreed that it is important to keep in mind that parents want their children to succeed - parents aren’t “the enemy,” and schools and community partners need to work with parents, honor the assets that parents bring to the table, and value parents’ roles in teaching children and supporting learning. As a community member in Decatur stated, “it’s far too easy to take the ‘worst

training comes into play in addressing this barrier - if teachers are prepared to value and welcome parents and trained to engage parents in meaningful ways, this barrier could effectively be removed.

Shared role

Parents, families, schools, and community based-organizations share some of the efforts necessary to develop and sustain strong family and community engagement. First, each party needs to **LET GO OF THEIR ASSUMPTIONS** of each other, of each other’s “motives,” and of each other’s capacities and capabilities (identified as barriers elsewhere in this report).

DEVELOPING EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATIONS CHANNELS

is also a shared role. Parents reported (in several communities) feeling as though the school “only calls with bad news,” and teachers, meanwhile, reported feeling as though sometimes parents “don’t want to hear it” or “don’t want to deal with it.” Effective, clear, and consistent communications structures, developed at the start of the year (i.e., before the first “bad call”) around



working with parents to address children's classroom behavior, for example, could short-circuit misunderstandings and misinterpretations of reactions.

One strategy - identified as effective in DeKalb, Decatur, Carbondale, and Springfield - to address for developing effective communications channels is working to make sure that **THE FIRST CONTACT A PARENT/FAMILY HAS WITH THE SCHOOL ISN'T NEGATIVE** (i.e., a call home about classroom behavior problems) but rather that the first interaction is positive. This helps teachers and parents build the relationships necessary to communicate effectively and problem-solve around (for example) classroom behavior issues.

KEY LEARNINGS

- As with the roles of other stakeholders, parents' have a role to play in letting go of, changing and overcoming the barriers posed by assumptions.
- A willingness to have difficult conversations serves to foster mutual trust among teachers, parents, and school leaders.
- Parents and families can play a key role in fostering engagement by modeling engagement and by developing the capacities for meaningful partnerships with schools among other parents and families.

Offentimes, having these first, positive contacts come at little to no financial cost to the school or the district, but they do require a commitment on the part of school leaders, teachers and staff. In DeKalb, a school district employee talked about how one of the teachers in their district makes it a point to send a few positive notes home to different parents each week, sharing good news, accomplishments, or appreciation of their children. Each parent received a few of these notes each year, and the teacher's willingness to reach out to parents in this way generated a positive "return on the teacher's investment" in the form of the relationships she established.

Related to having the first (or most) contacts being negative, parents reported some frustration about the school expecting parents solely to deal with classroom behavior issues, and conversely, school staff expressed a sense of frustration that parents expect classroom behavior correction to be solely the domain of the school. Each feels as though the other puts all of the

responsibility for solving the problems on them. Engagement depends on relationships, and relationships depend in large part on a sense of collective and shared responsibility and accountability for agreed-upon goals, including student achievement and classroom behavior. Challenges around classroom behavior (for example) can be **OPPORTUNITIES TO CREATE A SPACE FOR SHARED PROBLEM SOLVING** and can be situations that yield positive relationships, but this demands a commitment from and a willingness to engage in shared problem solving, as well as leadership, oftentimes, from the principal.

As with shared accountability and effective communications channels, schools need to **DEMONSTRATE THAT THEY CARE** about parents and honor their role in supporting schools and student achievement. This depends in part on schools' abilities to understand and meet parents' and families' needs, and is directly linked to cultural competency and a shared commitment to understanding where each party is coming from. Again, this is also linked to recognizing assets - a parent may not come to programs, come into the building, or attend school meetings for a variety of reasons. It is important to also acknowledge that parents can be engaged in student learning outside the building ranging from creating home-learning environments to having children be at school on time and ready to learn to being willing to talk to a teacher on the phone to resolve a behavioral issue or offer expertise.

Some "open questions" emerged from the discussions in each community around engagement. In each, at least one participant raised the point that the conversation centered on engaging parents who it takes only a little effort to involve. **THE OPEN QUESTION REMAINS WHAT STRATEGIES CAN AND**

HAVE BEEN UNDERTAKEN TO ENGAGE AND SUPPORT DISENFRANCHISED PARENTS, parents with larger challenges, and parents who are relatively disengaged from their children's educations. No community had a strong answer for this question, and as critical of an issue as it is, it merits further research, discussion, and development.

Role of community-based organizations

Open questions, raised in several of the sessions, remain unanswered by exploring the roles of schools and families alone. How can schools **CREATE ACCESSIBILITY** for parents and families? How can schools ensure that parents and families understand the resources and supports available in the schools? How do schools ensure that they engage other family members (i.e., parenting grandparents)? **COMMUNITY-BASED ORGANIZATIONS CAN PLAY INTEGRAL ROLES IN BRIDGING THE GAPS THAT EXIST BETWEEN FAMILIES AND SCHOOLS**, working with schools to develop parent-friendly cultures, and work with parents to understand their power vis-à-vis their children's schools and educations.

Community-based organizations can take the lead on creating opportunities to build relationships include shared relationship development activities such as barbecues to kick off the school year, fall bonfires, family nights, student performances, and adult education. More intensive efforts might be required, as well, and community based organizations can take the lead on undertaking and/or provide additional resources for these efforts, as well. For example, Decatur Project Success conducts one-to-one outreach with families through dedicated family coordinators with the goal being to truly understand families'

KEY LEARNINGS

- All stakeholders need to engage in clear, effective, and consistent communication and be willing to both share expertise and learn from each other.
- Engaged parents, schools, and community-based organizations have a responsibility to continue to work to engage, support and involve heretofore disenfranchised parents and families who feel and/or are completely disconnected from schools.



capacities, needs and assets and forge positive relationships with families.

Responding to the need to engage parents and developing their capacities to support children's academic efforts early, organizations like Baby Talk and Head Start conduct outreach, establish relationships, and support the development of "good parenting habits" early. As children and young people move through their educational careers, community-based organizations play critical roles in **ROUNDING OUT STUDENTS' EDUCATIONAL AND YOUTH DEVELOPMENT EXPERIENCES**, and, in some instances, provide role models and positive, caring adults for students who might face a dearth of those kinds of adult support. Decatur's Caring Black Men provides mentorship and support for vulnerable populations, demonstrating that the community cares about its young men. The Springfield YMCA has a parent mentoring program that uses Parent Educators (facilitated through a network of community partners) to engage and support families.



Community partners can also **LEVERAGE OTHER RESOURCES AND SUPPORTS** on behalf of families. Community school partners, for example, reach into their communities to leverage existing investments in programs and supports and to bring necessary resources into the school, making them available to students and families and accessing

under-or-unutilized programs. Community-based partners can also offer programs that serve to support classroom learning and support school success.

The sad reality is that not every student will have a parent or family member who can and/or will engage in learning and/or with school - it's up to the community to step in, step up, and fill that void so every child feels supported by adults. Supportive teachers, adult mentors, out-of-school time programs staffed by consistent and caring adults, and community activities all play a role in filling that void.

Role of the broader community

When the **COMMUNITY PRIORITIZES EDUCATION** and preparing its children and young people for success in school and life, resources begin to align, community members participate at school events, and students are no longer "isolated" in the school building but are in a learning, supportive environment

inside and outside school. Several things serve as evidence of this community-wide commitment. Coalitions like the Decatur Area Education Coalition, Springfield's Continuum of Learning, and DeKalb's KEYS programs all serve as examples of those communities' commitments to student success and youth development. Other commitments can be made, too, such as employer flexibility at all levels.

One of the barriers to engagement raised in both DeKalb and Decatur was the fact that people do not have the flexibility, in most jobs and/or professions, to leave work to attend school meetings, attend school events, and/or participate in shared learning opportunities. People expressed wanting **INCREASED JOB FLEXIBILITY** so that they can leave work to attend meetings at school, volunteer, see their children "in action," and engage with teachers and school leaders. This is

above underscores, parent and community engagement with school and in students' educations are critical to both academic achievement and positive youth development. Unless schools, districts, community-based organizations, and families all work together to create meaningful pathways for sustained parent and community engagement, students will miss out on valuable support, resources, and programs that they need to overcome barriers and thrive.

This requires commitments on the part of district leaders, school leaders, teachers, community members, and families to do the work it takes to build relationships and trust, identify and leverage resources, and overcome and move beyond assumptions about each other (including those that are deeply entrenched). It also requires an infrastructure - like the community school model - that provides a framework through which parent

KEY LEARNINGS

- Community-based organizations can (and should) play a key role in bridging gaps between parents and schools, building relationships between parents and schools, and creating accessibility to programs and supports.
- Community-based organizations can also reach out, create links to, and leverage resources and supports that students and/or families might not otherwise access or even know about, and can work with schools to bring those supports into the school building (i.e., community schools).

especially critical for people who worry about losing pay to take time out of the work day to attend events at schools. In other words, people need support from their employers - from community businesses - to be as involved with schools and their children's learning as they want to be.

A recurring barrier to meaningful parental engagement with schools and effective school/family relationships is the question of "whose responsibility is the first step?" Everyone is waiting for someone else to call, reach out, start the ball rolling, but it's really a two-way street that requires mutual trust, relationship building, and mutual respect. There are assets and strengths that each side brings to the table, but taking the first step seems to be a challenge for all.

As the work underway in Illinois and highlighted

and community engagement and other supports can be organized, coordinated, and sustained.

Without parent, family and community engagement with schools, our students will not achieve their full academic or developmental potentials. Without an infrastructure through which to organize community and parent engagement (such as the community school model) and/or without dedicated resources (including but not limited to funding and personnel such as resource coordinators, assistant principals or parent outreach coordinators), engagement strategies will not meet their full potential. Policy makers, legislators and school and community leaders would be wise to look at the strong engagement work underway in their communities, and look for ways to replicate and support this work.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Challenges to schools and communities working together to impact student achievement and youth development are hampered by policies against data sharing, disparate data collection systems, disparate outcomes tracking requirements, even different actual outcomes worked towards by similar programs. Shared outcomes, data tracking systems, data reporting requirements, and outcomes reporting back to providers and schools together would greatly improve efficiency and collaboration. **THE STATE SHOULD ADOPT A COMMON SET OF CORE OUTCOMES, COMMON DATA TRACKING SYSTEMS, COMMON AND REASONABLE DATA SHARING PARAMETERS, AND COMMON AND ACCESSIBLE REPORTS ACROSS ALL OF ITS ACADEMIC AND YOUTH DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMS.**

A lack of coordination among different state departments, entities within departments, and county/city/municipal services means that families in crisis must go to four or five (or more) different places and agencies to get access to supports that they need - it should be a seamless process, one-point-of-contact, ideally someplace the parents feel comfortable and supported (i.e., school) so that families can quickly and efficiently get the supports they need. **THE STATE NEEDS TO RAPIDLY SCALE UP AND REPLICATE PROGRAMS LIKE THE DEPARTMENT OF HUMAN SERVICES' OPEN DOOR INITIATIVE THAT PROVIDE SINGLE POINTS OF CONTACTS AND POINT-OF-NEED ACCESS TO SERVICES, ESPECIALLY FOR FAMILIES IN CRISIS.**

In Peoria, DeKalb and Decatur the issue of balancing safety concerns with creating pathways for engagement for parents and community members arose. Participants stated that the state and/or school districts need more realistic and streamlined background check processes and procedures so that "safe" adults can engage with schools and feel welcome to do so. The state needs to make sure that schools, community partners, and school districts can navigate the volunteer approval process - including background checks - easily and efficiently. **DISTRICTS AND THE STATE NEED TO LOOK FOR WAYS TO STREAMLINE THE PROCESS, RAMPING UP EFFORTS TO EDUCATE STAKEHOLDERS ABOUT THE PROCESS, OR WAIVING THE FEE FOR THE STREAMLINED PROCESS IN SOME INSTANCES.**

In examples cited in each community - including the YMCA parent mentorship program in Springfield, the Full Service Community Schools initiative in Peoria and the Baby Talk outreach underway in Decatur - having dedicated resource coordinators, outreach coordinators, parent liaisons, et cetera proves to be a very effective strategy for both engaging and supporting parents and families. This person serves to bridge gaps, bring everyone to the table, work through the engagement/relationship building process, and identify resources and supports to overcome obstacles. **THE STATE NEEDS TO ESTABLISH, FUND, AND SUPPORT SCHOOLS BEING ABLE TO STAFF A POSITION LIKE THIS. THE COMMUNITY SCHOOL MODEL AND THE PARAMETERS PUT IN PLACE WITH THE PASSAGE OF HB 684 PROVIDE AN EXISTING INFRASTRUCTURE THROUGH WHICH THE STATE COULD QUICKLY AND EASILY MAKE RESOURCE COORDINATORS AVAILABLE ACROSS THE STATE.**

Along those lines, Springfield's FACE teams, individual community school advisory boards, and other councils that allow for shared leadership and decision making across all stakeholders in children's educations are having positive impacts on schools, students, and families across their districts. **THE STATE SHOULD REPLICATE THESE SUPPORT-FOCUSED, SCHOOL-BASED LEADER AND**

WORK TEAMS BY DEDICATING FUNDING AND RESOURCES AND/OR ATTACHING THIS REQUIREMENT TO AN EXISTING FUNDING STREAM.

In Peoria and Carbondale, participants talked a great deal about what schools can and should do to support parents in establishing strong “home learning environments.” Some elements of a common definition of what that term constitutes emerged. **THE STATE SHOULD DEVELOP LEARNING STANDARDS AROUND CODIFYING WHAT A STRONG “HOME LEARNING ENVIRONMENT” LOOKS LIKE AND PROVIDE STRATEGIES, TOOLS, AND RESOURCES THAT SCHOOLS AND COMMUNITY-BASED ORGANIZATIONS CAN USE TO WORK WITH PARENTS TO DEVELOP HOME LEARNING ENVIRONMENTS.**

Teacher and leader preparation to undertake meaningful engagement strategies and the necessity for teacher and leader training programs to include curricula around engagement came up in every community. **THE STATE HAS AN OPPORTUNITY TO MANDATE THAT TEACHER/LEADERSHIP TRAINING PROGRAMS (TRADITIONAL AND ALTERNATIVE) PROVIDE TRAINING AROUND ENGAGING WITH, LISTENING TO, PARTNERING WITH, AND SUPPORTING PARENTS.**

Teacher and leadership training around how to promote parent and community engagement and the value of doing so are critical. **THE STATE SHOULD REQUIRE THAT ALL TEACHER AND PRINCIPAL PREPARATION PROGRAMS (BOTH TRADITIONAL AND ALTERNATIVE/NON-TRADITIONAL) INCORPORATE FORMAL CURRICULA AND REQUIREMENTS AROUND PARENT AND COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT. THE STATE HAS AN OPPORTUNITY TO PUT IN PLACE POLICIES THAT MANDATE THAT LEADERSHIP AND TEACHER PREPARATION/TRAINING PROGRAMS (BOTH TRADITIONAL AND ALTERNATIVE) INCLUDE SPECIFIC TRAINING/LEARNING/CURRICULA AROUND FAMILY AND COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT AND HOW LEADERS CAN DRIVE THAT WORK.** The breaking down of the silos around funding and among different organizations (at the community and state levels) is critical to maximizing family and community engagement opportunities, programs, and strategies. **THE STATE NEEDS TO PUT IN PLACE POLICIES THAT SUPPORT, MANDATE AND/OR “REWARD” CROSS-SECTOR COLLABORATION AND MAXIMIZING THE USE OF AVAILABLE AND DIFFERING**

FUNDING STREAMS - AT THE STATE AND MUNICIPALITY LEVELS.

Participants cited challenges around funding levels for and oversight of NCLB parent committees as leading to inconsistent accomplishments at some schools, ineffective committees at others, and generally watering down the possible impact of the program. **THE STATE AND FEDERAL GOVERNMENTS NEED TO PROVIDE ADDITIONAL FUNDING FOR THESE TEAMS AND MUCH MORE OVERSIGHT OF SCHOOLS STRUCTURE THEIR TEAMS, DEVELOP AND IMPLEMENT STRATEGIES, AND USE THEIR FUNDS.**

Due to a variety of factors ranging from gaps in training and preparation to assumptions to historically adversarial relationships between schools and parents, many principals either block or do not prioritize parent engagement. **THE STATE SHOULD HOLD PRINCIPALS ACCOUNTABLE FOR THE LEVEL OF PARENT ENGAGEMENT AND THE OPENNESS OF THE SCHOOL TO PARENTS AND COMMUNITY PARTNERS.**

COMMUNICATION STRATEGIES

In each of the seven sessions, the need for clear, effective, interactive communications channels between schools and families came up as a key to engagement. The following recommendations came out of several of the meetings, and offer some communication strategy best practices that other districts, schools, and community-based organizations can replicate and implement.

- Communication strategies are most effective when schools and parents work together to develop shared expectations of, goals for, and structures for communicating very early in the school year (even before the year begins). This process, in addition to the communications strategies it yields, itself serves to foster engagement.
- Schools should consider how they are letting parents know how to help their children achieve learning goals. Is it a packet home? Parent meetings/seminars? Phone calls? Schools should consider doing some of all of the above, depending on the information to be shared and parent access and preferences.
- In some communities, early childhood/pre-K

teachers conduct one-on-one home visits with students and their families before school even starts. This direct, individual, targeted communication goes a long way towards developing positive relationships between parents and teachers.

- Open Houses serve as excellent communication tools and in fostering engagement and building relationships. It is recommended that Open Houses take place earlier in the school year, have several different “times” available so that they are accessible for as many parents as possible, and included both information about and tools to support learning goals for the year. It is a good idea to have “what to expect” information should be available for parents prior to an Open House so that parents know what questions to ask, what kinds of expectations to have of the event, and what strategies they can use to engage their children's teachers.

- In order for parents to share their expertise with schools, schools should create “safe spaces” for honest communication and open dialogue. These spaces can be created through a variety of mechanisms, including Parent Information Resource Centers, Parent Cafes, and employing parent mentors to conduct trainings.

- Honest communication is a two-way street - parents sharing information and making themselves available for conversations with teachers lead to everyone being on the same page, working together to support children and young people.

- Clear, effective communication relies in part on the creation of a welcoming environment within the school. Creating a welcoming environment, in turn, involves being culturally competent and understanding each family's cultural background and community of origin, providing information through many channels and in different languages, and working to meet parents' needs around access to information and supports, depending on the needs of the families.

- Because assumptions that people hold about each other create barriers to engagement and collaboration, every opportunity that individuals each have to challenge assumptions and break down this particular barrier needs to be taken.

- With older children and young people, teachers can communicate directly with students about the types of supports they need to be academically successful. Teachers and students can establish mutual expectations and parameters around when students and/or their parents could contact teachers for homework help or school-work related questions.

- Parents sometimes experience “information overload” which makes it easy/tempting to tune out. Schools and parents can work together to prioritize information sharing so that parents access the information they need and are able to manage the flow of information. This begs the question - as to other points in this paper - of how schools can, do, or might personalize information sharing. In DeKalb and Carbondale, for example, several parents stated that they appreciated classroom Facebook pages and email lists as a way to access and share information. Other parents preferred one-on-one conversations with teachers, and still others preferred the “folder home in the backpack” approach. It is up to the school to work with parents to identify the channel or channels that work best.

- Several parents expressed appreciation for information and supports that “help parents help their children” with academics - an example was giving

of a teacher sending a packet to parents outlining the math goals and expectations for the school year and providing parents with tools and resources they could use to support their children's learning.

- During the Springfield discussion, a school district administrator from Pleasant Plains shared that she works to maximize events that bring people out. For example, she shares critical information about upcoming standardized tests just before a basketball game. Other schools do something similar, providing updates and critical information during the introduction to a school play or choir performance.

Some Highlights of What Works...

- Both parents and teachers checking in regularly with each other - "everyone makes that first step"
- Reminding parents that they ARE teachers - empower parents, create opportunities for them to be partners in children's educations
- Consistent, clear communications with an expectation of a response or an "action" (i.e., parents needing to review and sign off on children's homework folders)
- Curriculum Nights give parents an opportunity to see textbooks, learn about classroom content, but need to take place very early in the school year
- Shared teacher team planning time fosters relationships among parents and teachers - parents know what time the planning takes place, can reach out to teachers during those times
- Pre-K home visits before the school year starts - families' first contacts with teachers are positive
- "Parents as teachers" - schools need to look for ways to work with parents to reinforce classroom lessons and create home learning environments that support in-school learning
- Relying on parents' expertise

FAMILY AND COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT: WHAT WORKS IN ILLINOIS

LISTENING TOUR CO-CONVENERS

The Family and Community Engagement listening tour summarized in this paper was co-convened by the following organizations -



Federation for Community Schools is a state-wide advocacy and development organization aimed at changing public policy to support community schools and developing highest-quality community schools in Illinois. By bringing community school supporters together to advocate for public policies and funding to support community schools and to share best practices around community school development, the Federation and its members are ensuring the Illinois is in the forefront of community school work across the country. For more information, please visit www.ilcommunityschools.org.



Advance Illinois is an independent, objective voice to promote a public education system in Illinois that prepares all students to be ready for work, college, & democratic citizenship. To help Illinois' students and improve its public education system, Advance Illinois has developed a set of three policy priorities - discrete areas where "we can do better:" recruit, develop and empower effective teachers; set expectations and provide supports, and; empower local leaders to innovate.



Voices for Illinois Children works across all issue areas to improve the lives of children of all ages throughout Illinois state so they grow up healthy, happy, safe, loved and well educated. Voices for Illinois Children champions the full development of every child in Illinois to assure the future well-being of everyone in the state. We work with families, communities and policymakers on all issues to help children grow up healthy, happy, safe, loved, and well educated. For more information, please visit www.voices4kids.org.



Illinois PTA is a state wide volunteer advocacy association dedicated to the welfare of children and youth in home, school, community. Illinois PTA serves as a powerful voice for all children, a relevant resource for families and communities and is a strong advocate for the education and well-being of every child." For more information please, visit www.illinoispta.org.

The Illinois P-20 Council is a statewide coordinating body composed of government officials, business executives, university administrators, and other leaders in the education community. The Council's Family, Youth and Community Engagement Committee's purpose is to raise awareness about issues and proposed recommendations of the P-20 Council, provide opportunities for youth, families, and communities to have a voice in the deliberations, and make recommendations to the P-20 Council about the integration of youth and family and community involvement in education at all levels, including out of school time. For more information, please visit www2.illinois.gov/p20council.

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Brighton Park Neighborhood Council
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Carbondale Elementary School District 95
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Caterpillar
Central Christian Church (Decatur)
Central Illinois Community Health Centers
Children's Museum of Illinois
City of Decatur
City of DeKalb
City of Peoria
City of Peoria Workforce Network
Columbia College
Community Organizing for Family Issues
Consortium for Educational Change
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DCC Interactive
DCP Safe
Deatur Boys & Girls Club
Decatur Chamber of Commerce
Decatur Christian School
Decatur Daycare
Decatur Memorial Hospital
Decatur Park District
Decatur Public Library
Decatur Public Schools District 61
Decatur YMCA
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DeKalb County Community Foundation
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DeKalb County Regional Office of Education
DeKalb County States Attorney Office
DeKalb Housing Authority
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DeKalb School District
Easter Seals of Central Illinois
Family Service Agency
Girl Scouts of Central Illinois
Grace United Methodist Church (Decatur)
Greater Springfield Chamber of Commerce
GRS Human Resources
Heart of Illinois United Way
Heritage Behavioral Health Centers
Illinois Central College
Illinois PIRC
Immanuel Lutheran Church
Indian Creek Middle School
Kishwaukee College
Kishwaukee Education Consortium
Kishwaukee United Way
Kishwaukee YMCA
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