

Improving Parental Involvement in Illinois Under the No Child Left Behind Act



An Illinois Action Plan
School-Initiated, Parent-Cultivated, Community-Facilitated

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INTRODUCTION

On September 27, 2006, Appleseed released its report, *It Takes a Parent: Transforming Education in the Wake of the No Child Left Behind Act*. The work involved 18 school districts in eight states and was done as a collaborative effort by Chicago Appleseed Fund for Justice and Appleseed public interest centers in Connecticut, Georgia, Texas, and Washington.¹ The Appleseed national collaborative report includes five general findings and recommendations:

Findings

- Too many parents fail to receive clear and timely information about their children and their schools.
- Poverty, limited English proficiency, and varying cultural expectations are among the biggest barriers to parental involvement.
- Poor communication with parents hinders their ability to exercise the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act choice and supplemental education services option.
- Creative, multi-faceted communication and engagement strategies can promote better parental involvement in schools.
- Parental involvement is not uniformly valued by school leaders as a key accountability strategy.

Recommendations

- Officials from states, districts, and schools must provide meaningful, understandable, and timely information to parents regarding key school and student performance indicators.
- Districts and schools should pursue multiple, proactive strategies for communicating and engaging parents – particularly parents who are low-income or whose first language is not English.
- Districts and schools should leverage their limited resources by engaging community organizations.

¹ The national report was published by Appleseed, in coordination with several other key law firms and groups. Holland + Knight LLP coordinated and carried out much of the research and drafted the final report with assistance in two states from volunteers from DLA Piper. In addition, the National Center for Children and Families at Teachers College, Columbia University, and PricewaterhouseCoopers LLP played key roles in gathering and assessing information.

- Officials at the federal, state, and district levels need to prioritize and fund more comprehensive professional development for teachers and administrators, with special emphasis on challenges of culture and language. States should likewise consider including a practical focus on effective collaboration with parents as a requirement for teaching and administrative licenses.
- Federal, state, and local policymakers and educators should recognize parental involvement as central to school improvement and place parental involvement strategies on par with other steps taken to improve student achievement.

“Research studies consistently show a relationship between parental involvement and improved student achievement for families of all economic, racial, ethnic, and educational backgrounds.” (*The National Center for Family and Community Connections with Schools*) The goal of this Chicago Appleseed report is to provide local solutions that build upon the Appleseed national collaborative effort to create a constructive and achievable model of parental involvement to schools throughout Illinois.

Executive Summary

The logic is simple: children whose parents are involved in their education do better in school and on a number of achievement measures. Even parents showing interest in nightly homework can make an impact on a child's education. Educators realize how important parental involvement is, and research documents its importance, but too often a comprehensive parental involvement effort gets lost in the race to improve achievement scores and deal with pressing day-to-day problems in school systems.

Yet, parental involvement is more than just an accessory to education or a “feel good” measure to improve the collaboration between parents and educators. Parent involvement was included as a requirement under federal law as early as 1994 and is an important part in helping schools meet challenging achievement goals under the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB). As a result, written into new authorizations of the law is a section – Section 1118 – mandating that schools create plans for comprehensive parental involvement programs on a local and community level. Although schools are accountable to follow the law, there is little direction on how to create plans to improve parental involvement. As a result, parental involvement programs seem like “extras” rather than essential efforts. Schools are in the dark, not only about how to engage parents appropriately, but also about how to make engagement opportunities equitable despite the parents' varying income, education, and social backgrounds.

...too often a comprehensive parental involvement effort gets lost in the race to improve achievement scores and deal with pressing day-to-day problems in our school systems.

This report explores parental involvement programs under NCLB with a focus on the challenges facing Illinois. It looks at the efforts of districts and schools to initiate and implement parental participation programs from the vantage point of parents, educators, and community leaders – the three key stakeholders – in the effort to help students improve achievement. Chicago Appleseed will present a portrait of the state of parental

involvement in Illinois. Chicago Appleseed will identify the main challenges that confront educators in creating parental involvement programs under NCLB and engaging parents on behalf of their children's education.

Chicago Appleseed will also provide an outline for educators, policy makers, and community leaders of a model for parental involvement that prioritizes accountability and advocacy on behalf of children. In this model for parental involvement, Chicago Appleseed recommends a "Top-Down/Bottom-Up" approach to parental involvement programs. Specifically, schools and districts must work from the top-down to initiate parental involvement and create organizational structures to foster parental involvement in schools and make it a priority amongst educators and parents. Additionally, parents must also work from the bottom-up to take advantage of those structures, and make the programs flourish. Beyond this effort, there must be action and outreach to build the capacity of parents to participate in a meaningful way.

Parents coming from a disadvantaged background and facing economic and social hurdles must be cultivated and coached in a manner that improves the home environment for the child and gives parents the skills they need to interact and advocate within schools. This not only allows for equitable involvement for all parents regardless of background but also helps parents understand the most productive ways to help schools build higher achieving students. Both Top-Down (Schools Engaging Parents) and Bottom-Up (Building the Capacity of Parents to Support Schools) must exist as essential parts of a whole. But the efforts of local community groups also matter. As the Chicago Appleseed model outlines, community groups and Parent Information and Resource Centers (PIRCs)² can help make this relationship work. They can facilitate the

² Subpart 16 of NCLB allocates funds to PIRCs in order to help develop and implement the schools' plans or activities under Sections 1118 and 1119. PIRCs are meant:

- 1. To provide the tools to understand how children develop and what they need to succeed in schools including assisting parents in participating effectively in their children's education.*
- 2. To provide training, education and support in developing and implementing school improvements plans.*

For more information on Parent Information and Resource Centers, see <http://www.pirc-info.net/>

interaction between schools and parents, and build the capacity of parents by training them in the skills they need to interact effectively with schools.

Accordingly, for parental involvement to build the achievement of students, it must be: *School-Initiated*, *Parent-Cultivated*, and *Community Group-Facilitated*. Through secondary research, case study analysis, and interviews with parents, community leaders, educators, and leading educational experts, Chicago Appleseed has developed a model for parental involvement (which this report will describe in detail) and recommendations for change in Illinois.

Background

Potential in No Child Left Behind: Utilizing Meaningful Parental Involvement as a Mechanism to Improve Student Achievement

Much of the attention and dialogue on improving student achievement under NCLB has focused on regular standardized testing of students, quality of teachers in the classroom, and increased parental involvement in education.³ Parental involvement, as envisioned in the law, focuses on two aspects: 1) school choice, which grants parents the ability to advocate for their children by transferring them from one school to another; and 2) the home-school relationship, which can be cultivated to improve academic and non-academic outcomes that positively affect student achievement (Sheldon 2006).

Most of the policy and social science discourse on NCLB has revolved around the efficacy of testing standards, teacher quality, and school choice as mechanisms to improve achievement. Less attention has been paid to the provisions of NCLB that emphasize the importance of including families in education and the requirements for districts and schools to create a process and structure to include families in a meaningful, rather than symbolic, manner (Sheldon 2006). This is paradoxical because the consensus of studies on family involvement in education is that “students’ home environments and

³ For a summary discussion of what NCLB requires, see the Appleseed national collaborative report, *It Takes a Parent: Transforming Education in the Wake of the No Child Left Behind Act*. (See p. 10-15).

family involvement are important predictors of a variety of academic and non-academic outcomes” (Sheldon 2006:2). *The National Center for Family and Community Connections with Schools* reviewed 51 studies published between 1995 and 2002. Every study showed a relationship between parent involvement – and in some cases, community involvement – and improved student achievement (Henderson and Mapp 2002).

Furthermore, research shows that efforts by educators matter. Educators’ efforts to improve home-school relations have positive effects on the level of parental involvement and on student outcomes (Sheldon 2006). In terms of measuring student outcomes, several studies point to a growing body of evidence that, through high school, family/parental involvement has positive results for students in a wide variety of outcomes such as “higher achievement, better attendance, more course credits earned, more responsible preparation for class, and other indicators of success in school” (Catsambis 2001, Simon 2004, Epstein 2006: 2).

With each new reauthorization of NCLB, there have been significant changes in the law. In earlier versions of the law, mandates to involve parents were symbolic in nature, often including the participation of a few parents in advisory roles. In contrast, the law now contains a “nested” system of specifications for state, districts, and schools in order to incorporate the participation of all parents (Epstein 2005). These requirements move districts from merely policing compliance to facilitating the improvement of partnership programs (U.S. Department of Education 2004, Epstein 2005).

Specifically, Section 1118 mandates that districts, in order to help schools engage families and schools in a collaborative and participatory manner, do the following:

1. *Provide the coordination, technical assistance and other support necessary to assist participating schools in planning and implementing effective parental involvement activities to improve student academic achievement and performance.*
2. *Build schools’ and parents’ capacity for strong parent involvement.*

These two central elements lay a foundation for change and foster equality between educators and parents in order to improve students' academic success. Schools are supported in their efforts to involve parents in significant ways, and parents' capacity for involvement is enhanced to improve their ability to engage in collaboration and advocacy.

Capacity building includes the professional educator level, as well as the parent-focused and community organization-focused development programs to enhance capacity at every level.

Furthermore, beyond fostering equality between parents and schools, NCLB also includes mandates, incentives, capacity building, and system-changing elements identified as a theoretical framework that illustrates central tools for reform. Mandates regulate action; incentives reward or sanction actions; capacity building enhances professional knowledge and skills, which facilitate action; and system-changing elements redistribute leadership and decision-making to new

groups (McDonnell and Elmore 1991, Epstein 2005). In NCLB, mandates set out what schools and districts are required to do in increasing the quality and capacity of family involvement programs. Incentives in the NCLB Act reward or give funding for programs. Capacity building includes the professional educator level, as well as parent-focused and community organization-focused development programs to enhance capacity at every level. This increase in capacity, especially for parents, makes programs more equitable. Finally, system-changing elements are legislated in other areas of NCLB and allow for supplemental education services (SES) or the option to change schools (Epstein 2005).

Given the above framework, NCLB has the potential to bring about dramatic change with more "equitable partnerships of educators and parents across grade levels" if districts and schools adhere to all requirements (Epstein 2005:2). Yet, in Steven Sheldon's (2006) forthcoming article, "Getting Families Involved with NCLB: Factors Affecting Schools'

Enactment of Federal Policy,” compliance is not consistent across districts and states.⁴ In a study that uses longitudinal data, variables such as district support, principal support, and school-level leadership often affected the level of compliance with NCLB requirements (Sheldon 2006). Moreover, “quality” of compliance also varies. Beyond the mere quantity of programs, measures of “quality” show that not all programs are created equally (Epstein 2005). Successful implementation is not uniform, and barriers still exist. However, while some goals of NCLB may be challenging to attain, the data suggest that strong implementation of parental involvement programs is possible.

Given the potential built into NCLB, our report considers what meaningful parental involvement could look like, and provides an assessment of the current state of parental involvement under NCLB in Illinois.

... this report focuses on the opportunities to utilize meaningful parental involvement to increase student achievement in Illinois.

Given the research that links strong implementation of parental involvement programs to positive changes in student achievement, this report focuses on the opportunities to utilize meaningful parental involvement in order to increase student achievement in Illinois.

Defining Meaningful Parental Involvement as a Mechanism to Increase Student Achievement

This report adopts Joyce Epstein’s concept of “parental involvement,” which she more aptly refers to as “school, family and community partnerships.” Epstein’s term acknowledges the shared responsibility that parents, schools, and community have in cultivating student development and education (Epstein 2001). Epstein refers to these elements as “overlapping spheres of influence” where “involvement” is composed of many elements or partnership frameworks: parenting, communicating, volunteering, learning at home, decision-making, and collaborating with community.

⁴ Note that Finding 5 from the *It Takes a Parent* report states that “Parental involvement is not uniformly valued by school leaders as a key accountability strategy.” (See p. 26).

Given that researchers have found the “active forms of parent involvement produce greater achievement benefits than the more passive ones,” this broader, more inclusive definition of parental involvement seems most appropriate to the overall goal of NCLB: improving student achievement (Cotton and Wikelund 2001). Recognizing that parents differ greatly in how much willingness, ability, and time they have for involvement in school activities, this definition provides a continuum of options for parent participation in education regardless of the educational and socio-economic background of the parent.

Parental involvement is a shared endeavor in which schools, families, and community resources and organizations collaborate on behalf of increasing student achievement. Accordingly, the research design of this study was organized around lines of inquiry that address the three essential contributors to successful partnership programs: 1) parents and families, 2) schools, and 3) community organizations.

Methods, Research Design, and Sample: Data from Three Districts in Illinois

This report examines the ways in which Section 1118 is being implemented in Illinois in three sample districts. The report presents summarized findings from local interviews and focus groups with parents, community organizations, schools, districts, and leading academic experts in the areas of sociology of education and social policy.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with parents, educators, and community leaders in three Illinois districts: Bloomington (District 87), Evanston/Skokie (District 65), and Waukegan (District 60). At least 34 percent of students in all three districts are considered “economically disadvantaged” by the National Center for Education Statistics.⁵

⁵ Funds under Title I for Economically Disadvantage Students are determined by the number of students between the ages 5-17 who live below the poverty line as established by the Bureau of the Census, which is the same criteria used to qualify a student for reduced or free lunch. See NCLB Legislation, Section 1124, subpart 3, Part (C): Criteria of Poverty. <http://www.ed.gov/policy/elsec/leg/esea02/pg3.html#sec1124>

The following summarizes the key findings in these sample districts. It is these findings as well as the interviews with leading experts in the field of education and social policy that are the foundation for the Chicago Appleseed model for parental involvement and corresponding policy recommendations.

Key Points from Illinois Parents, Schools, and Community Organizations

Parents

Across all districts in this research sample, one commonality exists: parents are interested in being involved in their children’s education but have little awareness of NCLB as a means to facilitate the parent-school relationship and have an extremely

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narrow perception of what “involvement” entails. Overall, parental awareness of NCLB is low, and parents who are aware of NCLB have little understanding of how to improve student achievement through NCLB remedies.

Despite the lack of awareness of NCLB, parents have a positive perception of the work both principals and teachers do in communicating the academic progress and achievement of their children. Overall, parents are more

than willing to follow the lead and requests of schools but are less likely to initiate participation. Most parents view participation in their children’s education as merely attending structured events in the school itself.

Finally, the potential for improving achievement through parental involvement is strongest for children involved in community-based programs. These community programs act as crucial intermediaries to compensate for lack of awareness of NCLB

remedies and provide supplemental resources that parents may be unaware of or unable to provide.

Key Points:

- Parents are interested in being involved in their children's education but tend to define “involvement” in a very narrow way. Parents talk about involvement in education as being present in the school. Less emphasis is given to other types of activities and contributions that can help improve student achievement.
- Parent involvement is not seen in terms of NCLB and its remedies. Most parents are unaware of NCLB, possess negative views about the law, or are completely unaware of the advocacy remedies offered by NCLB. Some parents find NCLB materials too complicated.
- Despite the negative perceptions of NCLB, parents are positive about the efforts of educators on a local level. They understand that principals and teachers are making a concerted effort to communicate and involve them in their children's academic achievement. Little or no mention is made of school-wide efforts to involve parents in a structured, comprehensive manner. Instead, parents describe creative solutions to communication and involvement that individual teachers have developed.
- Parents with children involved in community-based after-school programs see positive outcomes, and, as a result, community groups earn the trust and respect of local parents.

Schools and Districts

Districts and school leaders see the benefit of implementing parental involvement programs to improve the achievement of students, but they define parental involvement

in a narrow manner – e.g., focusing on parents being present at school. Educators point to many activities to get parents involved in their children’s education, but assert that parental involvement is not uniform for all parents, and participation was often affected by larger social issues challenging families. Furthermore, although they see a push to improve parental involvement on a local level, educators are skeptical of attributing this trend to NCLB. In fact, some see NCLB as a hindrance to such efforts.

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Key Points:

- Schools and district leaders see a connection between the implementation of parental involvement programs and improving student achievement. However, like parents, they tend to define “involvement” in a narrow way – e.g., focusing more on parental presence at school and parent/school communication than on activities and contributions that can help improve student achievement.
- Schools and districts consistently mention that differential participation is a key problem in parental involvement efforts. Participation, especially by the families of at-risk children, is often affected by the socio-economic challenges of the parents.
- While schools and districts believe they are committed to efforts to enhance parental involvement in education, there is widespread skepticism that NCLB has had any positive impact on these efforts.
- Schools and districts believe that building a trusting relationship with parents is at the foundation of successful parental involvement. However, NCLB's reporting of Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) sometimes undermines schools' ability to build that trust, particularly when schools fail to make AYP.

Community Groups

Community-based organizations are essential resources for both schools and parents. Many community organizations already have programs that engage and support students and parents on a social and educational level. Because community organizations already have the trust of the constituents they serve, school districts' ability to establish working relationships with them can be crucial to meeting NCLB's requirements to increase parental involvement and to do so in an equitable fashion. Despite these positive attributes, community-based organizations remain a resource that is largely underutilized by Parent Information and Resource Centers (PIRCs) and schools districts alike. In fact, PIRCs have a monopoly in assisting with NCLB, and given the fact that they serve vast areas of the state of Illinois, the programs they offer are limited in flexibility.

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Key Points:

- Community-based organizations provide a myriad of relevant social and educational services to the communities they serve. As a result, they are uniquely attuned to the needs and challenges facing those communities and are adroit at tailoring their services to meet community needs.
- Similar to school and district leaders, community group leaders are pessimistic about NCLB as a means to improve parental involvement. Community leaders are critical of NCLB materials, which they feel are out of touch with local parents and thereby exclude parents who lack the education or language skills necessary to understand the materials.
- Despite the advantages of community-based organizations, PIRCs are responsible under NLCB for implementing and supporting better parental involvement under the law. PIRCs are charged with providing training, information, and technical assistance

to parents, schools, and organizations as well as providing the tools to understand how children develop and what they need to succeed in schools. This jurisdiction is based on the specifications in the law, and reinforced with NLCB funding, which PIRCs receive and community organizations do not.⁶

- Collaboration between PIRCs and local community groups, who are attuned to community needs and challenges, offer an opportunity for PIRCs to build relevance and effectiveness in the substantive materials they provide and the training they offer.

The Efforts of the Illinois PIRC

Parent Information and Resource Centers (PIRCs) are essential to the implementation of NCLB on a local level. The Academic Development Institute (ADI) served as the Parent Information and Resource Center for Illinois from 1997 through 2007. In order to provide context for the state of parental involvement in Illinois, we have outlined the following programs implemented by ADI. Although these programs are strong and supported by promising results and research, they affect only a small sample of underachieving schools in Illinois. Most of the PIRC work during this time was completed outside the three sample districts with the exception of a No Child Left Behind Leadership Conference held September 8, 2006, for parent leaders, school personnel, and community members and organizations in Waukegan, Illinois.

The following is an overview of the scope of the work completed by the Illinois PIRC outside of the three sample districts:

⁶ PIRCs receive funds for supporting parental involvement and implementation under NCLB. But only when funding exceeds \$50,000,000 can it be subcontracted to local organizations at only 50 percent of the incremental funds. The section on use of funds reads as follows:

SEC. 5564 of Subpart 16 requires:

1. *Fifty percent of the amount that exceeds \$50,000,000 to be subcontracted to local community based organizations to enable those organizations to support local parent information centers to participate effectively in their children's education.*

For more information on SEC. 5564 of Subpart 16, see:
<http://www.ed.gov/policy/elsec/leg/esea02/pg81.html>

1. Parent Guide to No Child Left Behind

Available for download on ADI's website⁷, this guide provides parents, grandparents, and primary caregivers with information on the benefits and remedies under NCLB, and on state learning standards and school performance. The website also offers tips to help improve a child's performance in schools.

2. Illinoisparents.org

Funded by ADI, this parent information website provides links to local programs, services, and community organizations that offer resources to help parents educate their children.⁸

3. NCLB Partner Project

ADI partnered with community- and faith-based organizations in five communities – Cicero, Chicago, Peoria, East St. Louis, and Carterville – to provide parent training workshops to increase awareness of NCLB and help families make informed decisions regarding their children's education. Partner organizations included: Interfaith Leadership Project (Cicero); West Town Leadership United (Chicago); Boys and Girls Club (Peoria); Christian Women of the New Wave (East St. Louis); and Child Care Resource and Referral Center (Carterville).

4. Solid Foundation Model

In 2004, ADI implemented its successful Solid Foundation Model⁹ in 15 schools throughout Illinois. Solid Foundation is a parent engagement program focusing on reading, studying, and responsible behavior that works to improve student achievement over a two-year period. Twelve of the 15 schools were awarded

⁷ For more information on the Academic Development Institute, see <http://www.adi.org>

⁸ For more information on IllinoisParents.org, see <http://www.illinoisparents.org>

⁹ Between 2001 and 2003, ADI's Solid Foundation Model was successfully employed in 129 high-poverty schools with support from the U.S. Department of Education and the Illinois State Board of Education. For more information on Solid Foundation, see <http://www.adi.org/solidfoundation>

Certified School Community Awards for outstanding achievement in building school communities.

A Model for Parental Involvement: The Top-Down/Bottom-Up Approach to Increasing Student Achievement

Educators and parents share common achievement goals for children, but there is considerable confusion and uncertainty about how parents should be involved and what level of involvement is appropriate.

Section 1118 of NCLB does not specify how to provide technical assistance and coordinate parental involvement programs. Furthermore, and most fundamental, there are no examples, guidelines, or models as to what “effective parental involvement activities” look like and what types of techniques may have long-term and wide-reaching influence on student achievement.

The Chicago Appleseed data demonstrate that as a result, schools and districts are left guessing about what level and amount of parental involvement is most effective.

The Chicago Appleseed research data demonstrates that, as a result, schools and districts are left guessing about what level and amount of parental involvement is most effective. There is also significant uncertainty about how to create parental involvement plans that impact student achievement. Parents, in

turn, are willing to participate in a way that is both meaningful and effective, but do not know where to start and have a low awareness of NCLB and its remedies. Finally, community groups help local families with a wide array of essential services and have earned the trust and attention of families. Yet, these community-based organizations remain underutilized as a resource to improve and facilitate the engagement of parents and schools.

In this section, Chicago Appleseed outlines a model for parental involvement that works to address these weaknesses and challenges and improve the state of parent involvement in Illinois overall.¹⁰ This model of parental involvement is based on: 1) the terms of NCLB, 2) the essential elements of successful parental involvement programs as detailed by leading policy and education experts, and 3) the priority of increasing student achievement on the part of districts, schools, and parents.

This model is what we call the Top-Down/Bottom-Up approach to increasing student achievement. By this we mean that parental involvement programs must be a product of the efforts of schools and parents together. First, schools and districts must work from the top to initiate parental involvement and create organizational structures to make parental involvement possible in schools and a priority with educators and parents. In terms of a “bottom-up” approach, parents must also do their part. Parents must be responsive to the efforts of schools. In addition, there must be action and outreach to build the capacity of parents to participate in meaningful ways. In families facing social, economic, or linguistic hurdles, parents must be cultivated and coached in a manner that improves the home environment for the child and the ability of the parent to interact and advocate within schools. Coaching and cultivation allow for equitable involvement for all parents regardless of background, but also helps parents understand the most productive ways to help schools build higher achieving students.

Both Top-Down (Schools Engaging Parents) and Bottom-Up (Building the Capacity of Parents to Support Schools) efforts must exist as essential parts of a whole. Yet

¹⁰ The Chicago Appleseed model incorporates the following five findings set forth in *It Takes a Parent*:

- Too many parents fail to receive clear and timely information about their children and their schools.
- Poverty, limited English proficiency, and varying cultural expectations are among the biggest barriers to parental involvement.
- Poor communication with parents hinders their ability to exercise NCLB’s choice and supplemental education services options.
- Creative, multi-faceted communication and engagement strategies can promote better parental involvement in schools.
- Parental involvement is not uniformly valued by school leaders as a key accountability strategy.

community groups also act as a central component to this model. Community groups can help make this relationship work. They can facilitate interactions and act as a bridge between parents and schools.

In summation, a Top-Down/Bottom-Up approach is a 1) *school-initiated*, 2) *parent-cultivated*, and 3) *community-facilitated* endeavor. These three essential components are central to improving student achievement as a collaborative effort as well as making such programs available to and equitable for all parents.¹¹ The following briefly articulates these components, which will be outlined in more detail later in the report.

1. School-Initiated

This component builds on Joyce Epstein’s model of successful parental involvement programs. An effective parental involvement program must include organized leadership and structure to diagnose local challenges within the school, create specific and pragmatic solutions, and implement change. Power is not consolidated within the group but distributed among educators, parents, and community representatives acting as a voice and “action arm” for change. This leadership and structure allow ideas to be implemented in an effective way. Through leadership and organized structure, parental involvement programs have permanency, accountability, and formal recognition within the school and act as a vehicle for teachers, parents, administrators, and community leaders to collaborate on diagnosing and solving local challenges.

¹¹ The following model for parental involvement is thus a synthesis of theoretical and thought leadership of experts in the field as well as data and observations made in the research. These data and observations, gathered by Chicago Appleseed and the national Appleseed network, act as a crucial means of assessing the state of parental involvement under NCLB. The data functions as a “barometer” in diagnosing the key barriers facing parents, districts, and community groups in Illinois and in the nation. The data also presents encouraging examples of success emerging from the interviews, the focus groups, and the actions of educators and parents interviewed in this research.

2. Parent-Cultivated

The first focus of parent cultivation is responding to the efforts of schools. Once schools initiate efforts to involve parents, parents must do their part to create a mutual relationship.

The second focus of parent cultivation is training parents to be better advocates for their children. This training helps to make programs more equitable for all. Parent involvement programs must cultivate the skills and capacities of parents by acknowledging that parents of different socio-economic and educational backgrounds have different abilities to interact with schools as equals. Accordingly, for parental involvement programs to be successful, they must correct for social factors such as parents' lack of income, lack of education, or significant language barriers that may diminish their ability to advocate for their children. Training and capacity-building allow for all parents to be heard equally and effectively.

3. Community Group-Facilitated

Community groups, given their trustworthiness in the community and their keen understanding of community needs and challenges, are uniquely positioned to serve as a bridge between parents and schools as well as a resource for both training and advocacy. Training and advocacy occur on two levels. First, community groups along with PIRCs can educate parents on NCLB resources available to them. Second, they can help train parents, especially those who face great disadvantage, in essential parenting skills and techniques to build their capacity to advocate for their children. Community groups can also play a diagnostic role for schools. As they respond to community needs, these groups acquire front-line information about the challenges facing parents and children that can impact education, which they can share with the schools.

Advocacy and Action: A Model for Translating Parental Involvement into Action and Change in Illinois

This section will outline the three essential components of meaningful parental involvement programs in greater detail as well as provide a case study to illustrate the principles of this model in action.

1. School-Initiated: Schools/Districts Must Create Partnerships Through Leadership and Structure

In order to create lasting parental involvement programs, schools must initiate leadership and organizational efforts to support the main accountability structures written into the law: testing and disclosures. That is, on the school- and district-level, a leadership structure is needed to make partnerships between educators and parents viable and effective in the long-run.

One such structure is outlined by Joyce Epstein and her colleagues in a handbook for educators and parents entitled, *School, Family, and Community Partnerships: Your Handbook for Action* (2002). Epstein refers to these team structures as ATPs or “Action Teams for Partnerships,” which are composed of three parents, three teachers, one administrator and one community representative.¹² ATPs can guide the development of strategic solutions in the following six types of involvement areas, which impact positive outcomes for students: parenting, communicating, volunteering, learning at home, decision-making and collaborating with community. The responsibility of an ATP is to assess current practices; create strategies for new and better partnership practices; implement solutions; and evaluate the next steps in all six frameworks of involvement.

According to Epstein’s research, ATPs distribute power to the three essential contributors to a child’s educational success: school, family, and community. It is through this

¹² For a summary discussion of the importance of community involvement in education, see *It Takes a Parent* (See p. 7).

leadership structure that partnerships become real, and the equality built into NCLB is reinforced on a smaller, more local scale. Furthermore, through a leadership structure like an ATP, specific solutions to local problems are enacted and implemented on a timelier basis, thereby reducing the need for drastic accountability levers such as school choice or after-the-fact failing report cards.

Through leadership and structure on the school- and district-level, partnerships become a group activity that works to improve the achievement of students and to target solutions to local challenges.

2. Parent-Cultivated: Parents Must Respond to Efforts Initiated by Schools, and Schools Must Consider Social and Language Barriers That Hinder Parental Participation

“Parent-cultivated” refers to two types of efforts. First, for parent involvement programs to work, parents must be responsive to the efforts initiated by schools, and willing to work on them. Parental efforts and responsiveness are essential to the success of programs. Second, given the different abilities of parents from different cultural and socio-economic backgrounds, some parents themselves must be cultivated to be able to participate on equal terms.

The social class and resources of the parents often affect their ability to respond to the requests of schools.

The social class and resources of the parents often affect their ability to respond to the requests of schools. Social factors such as a parent’s lack of income and education or a language barrier affect the parent’s ability to cultivate and comply with the efforts of schools. Partnerships (as discussed above) assume that parents have basic skills and resources in order to collaborate with teachers. Such assumptions fail to account for differential access to resources as well as differing cultural interpretations of parental involvement, depending on a family’s social class (Lareau 1987, Lareau 2003).

For instance, in Annette Lareau's research, working-class and middle-class parents shared the desire for their children's educational success, yet the parents' social location led them to construct different pathways for realizing such success. Working-class parents often saw their child's education as the teacher's responsibility because of the teacher's expertise. Just as they would defer to a doctor as an expert to heal a child, working-class parents often viewed teachers as expert authority figures, not collaborative partners (Lareau 1987, Lareau 2003).

In order to make parental involvement equitable, it is not enough for schools to initiate structure and leadership that open lines of communication to the concerns of all parents. Effort and consideration must also be given to the educational status, material resources, and language barriers of parents – all attributes that are instrumental to parental involvement.

In Lareau's sample, working-class parents had poor educational skills, relatively lower occupational status compared to that of teachers, and limited time and disposable income to intervene in their children's education. Furthermore, Epstein (2002) summarizes the following differential involvement patterns:

- Affluent communities currently have more positive family involvement, on average.
- Schools in economically depressed communities make more contact with families about student problems and difficulties.
- Single parents, parents who are employed outside the home, parents who live far from the school and fathers are less involved at the school building.

Given such challenges, the parent-cultivated aspect of parental involvement programs demand not only that parents respond to the efforts of schools, but also that parents themselves are cultivated to compensate for social disadvantages. Community groups, as the next section illustrates, are central to correcting for such discrepancies.

3. Community-Facilitated: Community Groups Can Foster Equity Through Awareness, Advocacy, and Training

Community groups are positioned to facilitate the relationship between schools and parents by acting as a catalyst and an essential resource for the development of partnerships between them.

Our data suggests that community groups offer many social services beyond education to the communities they serve. Community groups are attuned to the needs and challenges of the community. They address social hurdles that could affect educational performance. Given the services they provide, community groups have earned the trust of the constituents they serve. They are thus in a position to help facilitate parental involvement in central ways.

First, community groups can provide *educational advocacy training*. As the previous section addressed in greater detail, not all parents approach schools on their children's behalf with the same amount of economic, educational, or social resources. Educational advocacy training can help level the playing field so that parents, regardless of their cultural, social, and economic background, are able to advocate as equals on equal terms with educators. One example comes from the educational advocacy curriculum by Professor William Sampson of DePaul University. His programs educate parents on how best to advocate for their children and how to create and improve home environments; the programs also give parents the skills they need to overcome obstacles to involvement such as language barriers.

Educational advocacy training can help level the playing field so that parents, regardless of their cultural, social, and economic background, are able to advocate as equals on equal terms with educators.

Second, community groups act as unique resources for all parents. Our research shows that parents have a low awareness of NCLB and its remedies. Community groups have a captive audience within the communities they serve and are aware of the communication needs of their audience. They are in a position to educate parents, in ways that are accessible to them, about the NCLB remedies that are most relevant to their children and schools.

Finally, beyond educational roles, community groups can also play a diagnostic role in identifying unique challenges in the community and collaborating with school-initiated leadership structures. In this way, community groups can help ATPs identify key community challenges that may act as barriers to education and parental participation. Beyond having a representative serve in an ATP-like leadership structure, community groups are central to identifying and accessing the most pressing local issues that can undermine parental involvement and student achievement.

A Case Study: Overcoming Economic and Social Disadvantages with Schools, Parents, and Community Groups – Working Together to Increase Parental Involvement Among Low-Income Families¹³

The following case study, reviewed in the Academic Development Institute's *School Community Journal*, demonstrates the successful use of the Top-Down/Bottom-Up approach at a school where parents faced economic and social hurdles.¹⁴ It examines the efforts of educators, families, and community members to develop and implement effective parental involvement strategies among low-income families at Clark Elementary (pseudonym), a public elementary school in the Pacific Northwest.

Clark Elementary School was located in a predominately low-income neighborhood where many parents faced challenges of unemployment or underemployment as well as limited English proficiency.

¹³ This case study is included because it is a working example of our parental involvement model, demonstrating a successful collaborative effort of educators, families, and community members to develop parental involvement strategies among low-income families. Although this article does not specifically refer to our Top-Down/Bottom-Up framework, their efforts demonstrate our model in action. For other examples of parental involvement case studies, see *It Takes a Parent* (See p. 32-34).

¹⁴ Jane Graves Smith, "Parental Involvement in Education Among Low-Income Families: A Case Study," *The School Community Journal*, 16 (1), 43-55 (Spring/Summer 2006).

In 1998, the Clark Advisory Committee – which included members from community organizations, government agencies, the local church, a neighborhood association, the Clark Parent-Teacher Organization, Clark educators, and school district personnel – began planning for the opening of a new Clark Elementary School, which was needed to replace the old building. In order to involve parents effectively at the new school, the committee interviewed parents, residents, and community agencies to evaluate the needs of the school families. By understanding the specific challenges facing the neighborhood – low incomes, limited English skills – Clark Elementary was able to develop appropriate parental involvement strategies that served the needs of the families, as well as utilize their strengths to increase their involvement in their children's education.

Clark Elementary's approach to supporting and engaging families in education included the three essential attributes of effective parental involvement programs discussed in previous sections: School- and District-initiated; Parent-cultivated; Community group-facilitated.

School- and District-initiated: The school and district (with the aid of the research done by the Clark Advisory Committee) took the lead and developed a structure for diagnosing the local challenges facing the neighborhood; creating specific solutions based on these challenges; and implementing change in the new school. By recognizing that Clark parents faced economic and language challenges, the new school was able to provide facilities to meet the needs of the families, including a computer lab, ESL classes, a food bank, and a Family Resource Center where parents could network with educators and other parents.

Parent-cultivated: This understanding of Clark families helped the school develop relationships with parents and implement parent involvement strategies that cultivated parents' strengths and capacities. The school recognized that parental involvement at Clark would be different from parental involvement at middle- and upper-class schools, given the needs and time limitations of the families. Therefore, even small attempts by parents – using the computer lab, picking children up from school, etc. – were welcomed.

In turn, Clark parents also did their part to respond to the relationship offered by the school by taking advantage of services, talking to teachers, and engaging in learning activities at home with their children.

Community group-facilitated: Community groups also played a major role in the creation of parental involvement programs at Clark. Not only were they a tremendous resource in efforts to meet the needs of the families – food bank, computers, etc. – but they also provided input in the planning stages on understanding the needs and strengths of the community. By being involved at both the input and advocacy levels, the community groups had a real sense of ownership of and commitment to the new school.

Chicago Appleseed Advocacy and Action: Recommendations

Illinois data suggests that there are barriers to accomplishing the Top-Down/Bottom-Up model of parental involvement. The following section details specific, policy-based recommendations and advocacy goals that will help Illinois build comprehensive and effective parental involvement efforts under NCLB in order to increase achievement. Effective implementation of parental involvement programs requires the implementation of a systemic model that allows the interests and concerns of both parents and school districts to be taken into account.

The national Appleseed report, *It Takes a Parent*, focuses on a variety of recommendations aimed at improving parental involvement under the NCLB Act. Our companion report focuses on the need to devise and implement an approach to improving parental involvement programs in an effective and fair way specific to Illinois.

1. Avoiding One-Size-Fits-All Solutions: Conducting Individualized Needs Assessment Related to Parent Involvement as a Necessary First Step for School Districts

Parental involvement programs are not “one-size-fits-all” propositions: solutions and activities that help one community may not work as well in another community. Each of the three districts in this study – despite having mixed socio-economic and racial compositions, and comparable performance statuses under NCLB – faced their own unique set of hurdles and challenges. Accordingly, no one solution or program can fit every local context.

Yet, as the case study details, leadership structures like ATPs have the essential role of conducting an in-depth needs assessment related to parental involvement. This needs assessment should lead to the development of a Parental Involvement Plan and should involve parents, community organizations, the business community in the area, teachers, and school administrators. The assessment should take into account the particular cultural and socio-economic composition of the area and should include an inventory of community resources. This assessment is a necessary starting point for all schools before they embark on creating parental involvement programs.

2. Building Parental Capacity Through Training: Developing Community Groups as a Resource

Community groups – which already have the trust of the community and knowledge about its needs – are an important and often untapped resource for improving parental

By working with parents, community groups have a unique vantage point on the needs and concerns of the parents they serve.

involvement programs in schools. Not only can community groups educate parents about how to be effective advocates for their children's education and act as liaisons between parents and schools, but they can also assess the needs of the community they serve and offer equitable solutions to meet these needs.

First, Chicago Appleseed recommends that community groups share in the task of educating parents on NCLB. By this we mean that, through training, community groups can build parental awareness of 1) NCLB resources and remedies and 2) the importance of parental involvement under NCLB. Through this training, community groups can educate parents on the specific sections of NCLB – for example, Section 1118 – that directly apply to them.

However, for parental involvement to be equitable, community groups must do more than educate parents on the specifics of the law. They must also take into account the different backgrounds parents bring to parental involvement (educational status, material resources, language barriers, etc.), which can be a considerable hurdle to parental involvement. By working with families at a grassroots level, community groups have a unique vantage point on the needs and concerns of the parents they serve.

This leads us to Chicago Appleseed's second recommendation for community groups. Community groups can offer programs and training to build the capacities of parents so that they can help to improve the quality of parental involvement in schools. These programs and training should be tailored specifically to meet the needs and concerns of parents they serve. For example, if those parents have a limited educational background, community groups could support them by offering a variety of classes to build the potential of parents to be better advocates for their children in school.

Third, Chicago Appleseed recommends that community groups act as liaisons between parents and schools by opening the door for enhanced and effective communication between the two groups. Because community groups are constant barometers of parent needs, they should voice such concerns through ATP structures as well as through forums like parent-teacher associations or school boards. ATP structures and community groups should work hand in hand to diagnose challenges facing parents and solve such challenges.

3. Expanding the Role of PIRCs: Offering Technical Assistance and Coordination to Help Connect Parents to Schools and Schools to Parents

Nationally, there are more than 70 Parent Information and Resource Centers (PIRCs) helping to facilitate parental involvement under NCLB. These organizations vary widely in their approaches to engaging parents as well as in the quality of the services they offer.

As Chicago Appleseed was conducting research and writing this report, the Federal Department of Education announced funding for a new Illinois PIRC: The Harris Center for Early Childhood Education at Columbia College Chicago, in Chicago, Illinois. As a result of this newly funded PIRC, the state of Illinois faces a time of change and opportunity.

Chicago Appleseed looks forward to collaborating with both the outgoing PIRC and the newly funded PIRC, working as a partner to ensure that parental involvement, as mandated by NCLB, is a measurable reality. Chicago Appleseed recommends that the role of Parent Information and Resource Centers be more expansive. Much of the focus of the previous Illinois PIRC had been on parent education. Yet, as elaborated above, community groups are essential resources. PIRCs can offer technical assistance to and/or collaborate with community organizations interested in actively engaging parents under Section 1118. Community program directors need schooling in what NCLB and Section 1118 entails; and PIRCs, being the experts on NCLB and its remedies, are well equipped to administer this technical assistance and training. PIRCs can help community groups approach their constituents and devise programs to engage parents and schools.

4. Constructing Parental Involvement as a State Issue: Utilizing the Resources of the Illinois State Board of Education to Promote Meaningful Parental Involvement Within Illinois School Districts

In Chicago Appleseed's interviews with educational leaders in Illinois, parents, and representatives of community organizations, a common theme emerged: Parental involvement is often seen as a local issue rather than an issue of statewide concern,

resulting in two specific problems. First, some educational leaders in Illinois devalue parental involvement programs, and do not make the connection between building parental involvement and increasing student performance. Second, local districts and schools are left without comprehensive leadership and advice on how to start implementing a parental involvement program in their schools.

. . . we recommend that the Illinois State Board of Education utilize existing programs providing technical assistance to Illinois school districts to offer accountability and oversight to parental involvement programs on a local level . . .

To counter this problem, Chicago Appleseed recommends that the Illinois State Board of Education utilize existing programs providing technical assistance to Illinois school districts to offer accountability and oversight to parental involvement programs, and to offer technical advice and support for improving parental involvement statewide. This technical advice would help refer schools to resources like Joyce Epstein’s National Network of Partnership Schools or other resources that would help schools move towards a comprehensive partnership on a local level.¹⁵

5. Making the Connection Between Parental Involvement and Increasing Student Achievement: Spreading the Word

Despite the valid efforts of districts and schools, our data shows that parental involvement programs in Illinois are still regarded as accessories rather than as necessary elements of better education. Although research has proven that parental involvement improves student achievement across a wide array of measures, educators have yet to recognize that parental involvement is an essential component to drive change and improvement. To increase awareness and promote change, Chicago Appleseed recommends the following efforts:

¹⁵ Recommendation 5 of *It Takes a Parent* (p. 40) highlights the importance of the role of state policymakers and educators in bringing about parental involvement: “Better Implementation and Stronger Accountability. Federal, state and local policymakers should recognize parental involvement as central to school improvement and place parental involvement strategies on par with other steps taken to improve student achievement.”

- Chicago Appleseed recommends legislative hearings and regional forums among key stakeholders, leaders, and legislators in Illinois to discuss meaningful parental involvement, to acknowledge and publicize schools and districts taking the lead in such efforts, and to identify specific Illinois legislative action that can formalize parental involvement as essential to Illinois school systems. Chicago Appleseed will work with Governor Blagojevich's recently announced Illinois Parent Leadership Council to help identify and implement the most effective approaches to bringing about meaningful parental involvement in Illinois schools.
- Chicago Appleseed recommends meetings with community organizations and representatives of PIRCs to share Appleseed results and discuss potential collaborative efforts.
- Chicago Appleseed recommends an Illinois-oriented resource guide that parents, schools, and community organizations can use to access more information and expertise about parental involvement.
- Chicago Appleseed recommends discussions with schools and teachers about integrating parental involvement training as part of continuing education for existing teachers as well as in the general curriculum for schools of education.
- Chicago Appleseed will prepare articles for academic journals, parent publications, school trade journals, and the media discussing the need for a better systemic model of improving parental involvement.
- Chicago Appleseed will meet with representatives of the Illinois Association of School Administrators and the Illinois Association of School Boards to discuss the need for a better systemic model of improving parental involvement.

- Chicago Appleseed will meet with representatives of the Illinois State Board of Education to discuss a larger role for the State Board in promoting effective parental involvement within the local school districts.
- Chicago Appleseed will prepare annual reports on the status of parental involvement in Illinois.

Conclusion

This Chicago Appleseed report sets forth a model through which parents, schools, and community organizations can cooperate in developing partnerships for meaningful parental involvement. In so doing, Chicago Appleseed utilized existing research, its own research findings, and the findings and recommendations of the Appleseed national collaborative report. Chicago Appleseed's goal is to facilitate a process through which these efforts can be translated into specific actions and specific results for Illinois schools.

Schools and policymakers need to acknowledge the importance of parental involvement, including its demonstrated role in improving student achievement.

Schools and policymakers need to acknowledge the importance of parental involvement, including its demonstrated role in improving student achievement. Community organizations need to be allowed to play a pivotal role in facilitating parental involvement partnerships. Chicago Appleseed seeks to serve as a catalyst in bringing about parental involvement partnerships in Illinois.

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