

Parent Involvement: Keys to Success

A podcast series from the Appalachia Regional Comprehensive Center

Cultivating Parent Leaders

Transcript

Narrator: All parents can be a resource for their children and their schools. To capitalize on this resource, schools must recognize and cultivate the knowledge and strengths of each family. In this podcast, one of a series about parent involvement in the schools, we will explore ideas for helping parents become leaders not only in your schools but at the state level. Developing leaders is one of six areas identified in research as being critical for successful parent involvement.

Listen to this short podcast about cultivating parent leaders, and follow suggestions to assist schools and districts as they help parents become leaders in the schools. Helpful tools are available online at the Appalachia Regional Comprehensive Center's Web site, www.arcc.edvantia.org, where other podcasts can also be accessed.

June Atkinson, North Carolina State Superintendent of Public Instruction, offers some insight on the important role of parents in education.

June: "Parents are our children's first teachers. Parents are a support system for our children, and if we are going to squeeze every ounce of student achievement from our students, then we need to make sure that the parent is a partner in that effort. Parents are so influential when it comes to helping students understand, 'Why do I have to learn?' 'Why do I have to go to school?' And it's up to parents and teachers to look at their children as potential gold mines. And as parents and as educators, we must make sure that they have the tools so that every child can mine that gold—so that they can develop their dreams and not only develop those dreams but fulfill those dreams. Our parents have to be a part of developing dreams for students. And we know that students who dream, students who have goals, are much more likely to continue to achieve. And so parents play a critical role in helping students develop dreams. They also play a critical role in encouraging students to pursue those dreams."

Narrator: Parents have a critical role in their child's education, and yet they are not always sure about what to do or how to help. If we want and expect parents to become effective partners in improving schools and helping raise student achievement, then we will need to provide training, information, and support to parents.

Let's listen as Anne Henderson, noted author and consultant in the field of parent involvement, presents an idea on involving parents from the outset.

Anne: "It's also important to give parents a voice. Schools will tell me, 'We planned this and this and this, and sent out all these fliers, and only 20 people came.' And I said, 'Well, who did you plan it with?' And they said, 'Well, we got a group of teachers together and we decided that this would be a really nice thing to do.' And I said, 'But, what about parents—did they have anything to do with this?' 'Well, no, gee, we didn't know who to call or didn't think of that.' But it's important for parents to decide what the parent involvement program is going to be and for parents to get invested in it because if they reach out and bring other parents, that's how you're gonna get the attendance."

Narrator: Anne has made the point that if we can get some parents involved in the planning process, they can be instrumental in getting other parents to join the family-school-community partnership.

Sande Shepherd, parent leader in Jefferson County, Kentucky, offers this idea about who to involve in this planning process.

Sande: “I have been involved in the planning process on the school and district level, and one of the things that I find—sometimes we involve parents that are always there, the ones that are the PTA presidents, the school council members, because we might be easier to get. We can be assured that I will show up, or those more active will show up, and what I think is really important from a building capacity standpoint is ensuring that all different types of parents are involved—and parents that are, maybe not have my skills, but have different skills, or just need to learn something. People that are interested do always have a different perspective, and I think that part of the planning process can be really important, not only for the parents but for the people that are also involved in the process—the teachers, the administrators.”

Narrator: Inviting parents to participate in decision-making roles is a great way to encourage leadership among parents, as well as providing the school or district with the parent perspective. Parents, however, may not initially feel comfortable in these positions. School staff will need to provide a way to help parents move into these roles by gradually increasing their responsibilities, but they may also need to provide training to parents to help them cultivate the skills they will need.

While schools often handle parent training on their own, Anne Henderson writes in *No Child Left Behind: What's in it for Parents*, that “it is more effective when school districts take the lead. Districts should make available a training program of consistent quality for parents.”

Some districts, however, may not have the resources to develop their own parent training program. In this case, looking to well-established models may be a good place to start. Let's listen as Cindy Baumert, co-chair of the Kentucky Commissioner's Parents Advisory Council, talks about her experiences and suggestions regarding parent leadership training.

Cindy: “As PTA president in a successful school, I supported the teachers, worked with the parents to provide fun activities and tokens of appreciation to students and families. Our PTA had a large budget and hundreds of volunteers. We attended national, state, and local PTA trainings and conventions. We were very active in our children's school and we were considered the parent leaders.

And then we stumbled onto parent leadership training from the Commonwealth Institute for Parent Leadership. At this training, we learned how to understand state data. And that told us that while our school was considered successful it still had huge achievement gaps for some students, especially students with disabilities and students who qualified for free and reduced-price lunch. We were shocked to learn this. It was a pivotal moment for us to realize that our involvement as parent leaders to that point had just scratched the surface.

The Commonwealth Institute is a program of the Prichard Committee for Academic Excellence. It provides information on learning styles, leadership styles, school culture, academic standards, assessment, data analysis, and involvement with lasting impact. This training prepares parents to be involved in improving the academic achievement of all students, and it prepares them to be productive

members of school boards, school-based decision-making councils, and state- and district-level committees.

What do schools and districts need to do to create and sustain parent leaders of this magnitude?

First of all, provide training. The Commonwealth Institute has been such a successful model that it is now available nationwide as the Center for Parent Leadership. Provide local support. School staff must support parents and build capacity as they work with schools. And provide statewide infrastructure. The Harvard Family Research Project presents a framework of authentic parent participation which is described as, “the deep and continuous involvement in administrative processes with the potential for all involved to have an effect on the situation.

Whether you are at the state, district, or school level, if you believe all students can learn at high levels, you have no choice but to develop and sustain parent leaders to make that happen. It’s as simple as that.”

Narrator: Head Start is another program that has made parent involvement an essential component. When a child is enrolled in Head Start, the parent is invited to the classroom and asked to serve on a class committee. Parents are encouraged as they become more confident in their involvement. They also feel supported as they become more involved based on their interests and abilities. Parent involvement is an integral part of Head Start, and parents have come to expect it.

While these models can be used as a starting point for districts, Anne Henderson suggests that “districts not wanting to develop their own programs can contract with Parent Information Resource Centers, also called PIRCs, to offer training. Each state has at least one PIRC, and PIRCs are charged with providing training and information to parents, including information about Title I.” A link to the U. S. Department of Education’s PIRC Web site is included on the podcast launch page.

Parents who are trained to be leaders in their local schools can be encouraged to get involved in a larger venue. June Atkinson advocates for parent involvement at the state level, not just in the local schools.

June: “Public education is a complex system, and in any system we have to make sure that we involve the stakeholders, and certainly our parents are huge stakeholders in the education of their children. So, Consequently, we have to involve parents at the state level in decision making and policymaking. In North Carolina, our state board of education is at the hub of making policies that will have a direct impact on students, and without the voice of parents, our state board of education cannot make the best decisions for our children.”

Narrator: In addition to providing research, resources, and professional development to district and school staff, SEAs can involve parents in the projects, programs, and decisions that will ultimately affect their children. This will not only help the SEA to make choices that best serve all stakeholders, but will set a positive example for schools and districts with respect to parent involvement.

We hope you have found the information about parent leadership training helpful as you consider ways to cultivate parent leaders in your state. More information and resources are available on the Appalachia Regional Comprehensive Center’s Web site at www.arcc.edvantia.org. Join us for our next podcast in this series, where we will focus on Parent Liaisons—The School-Community Link.

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