



Nelson



Guerra

## Empowered parents partner with schools to meet student needs

Decades of research suggest the home-school connection is a key factor in student success. When talking about these relationships, educators often speak in general terms as if there is only one kind of home-school connection and as if it looks the same for everyone.

We have developed a schema for thinking about three of the most common types of home-school connections — involvement, engagement, and empowerment — and how these connections may vary depending on the backgrounds of students and families.

In each issue of *JSD*, Sarah W. Nelson and Patricia L. Guerra write about the importance of and strategies for developing cultural awareness in teachers and schools. Nelson (swnelson@txstate.edu) is an assistant professor in the Department of Education and Community Leadership and associate director of the International Center for Educational Leadership and Social Change at Texas State University-San Marcos, and co-founder of Transforming Schools for a Multicultural Society (TRANSFORMS). Guerra (pg16@txstate.edu) is an assistant professor in the Department of Education and Community Leadership at Texas State University-San Marcos and co-founder of Transforming Schools for a Multicultural Society (TRANSFORMS).

Columns are available at [www.nsd.org](http://www.nsd.org).

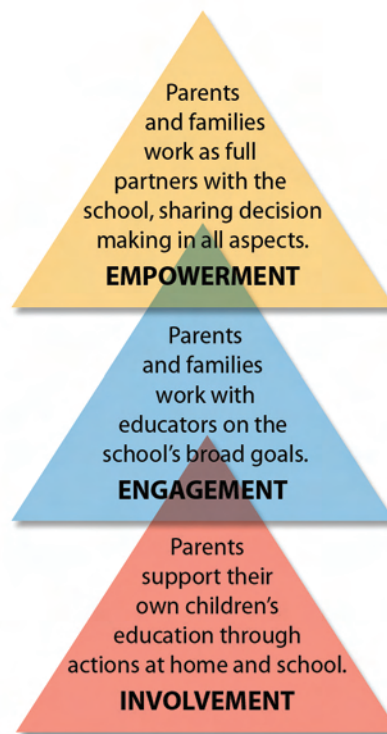
In the previous two columns, we wrote about parent involvement and parent engagement. Here, we discuss parent empowerment.

With parent involvement and parent engagement, parents are in the position of responding to the school's needs. Parent empowerment is distinct in that it requires a different kind of relationship between home and school. With empowerment, parents and families are not responding to needs identified by the school. Rather, parents and families work as full partners with the school to create a school that is responsive to the assets and needs of students and families in the community.

Parent empowerment requires a dramatic shift in the way schools and families work together. Traditionally, schools, and in particular, school leaders, have controlled the home-school relationship. Schools set expectations for parent participation and establish limits on parent interaction with the schools. Schools create meeting agendas and determine what issues are appropriate for parent input. Schools also control the budget and the other resources required to make change. Schools even control, or at least strongly influence, which parents are selected for participation on site-based decision-making councils, PTA offices, and other governance groups.

Because schools hold most of the power, parents often have little voice in the relationship and can feel devalued or manipulated by the school. This is espe-

### A range of home-school connections



cially true for culturally, linguistically, and economically diverse families who have historically been marginalized in the educational system. To create authentic relationships, schools must share power with parents and families. Sharing power means making school practices transparent, providing parents with key information, and allowing parents unfettered access to the school.

However, letting go of the tight control schools hold in the home-school re-

lationship takes courage. There is fear that, without clear boundaries and limits, parents will have unreasonable expectations and make demands the school cannot meet. While it's true that allowing parents full access means parents will likely question the way things have been done and may ask the school to make changes, we have found that empowered parents are actually highly supportive of schools. They understand that teaching and learning are complex and require hard work. Because empowered parents see themselves as an integral part of the school, they are willing to work alongside educators to improve educational experiences for all students.

### **MOVING TOWARD EMPOWERMENT**

Parent empowerment can be developed in a variety of ways. In some schools, there is a parent council made up of representatives selected by parents in the community. In other schools,

much of the work that has been done previously around parent involvement must be undone. Some parents have come to understand that schools only want a certain kind of input and involvement, and schools do not provide parents with the information or resources they need to fully participate in the life of the school.

Convincing parents that the school is sincere in its desire to develop a new kind of partnership requires that schools build collaborative and trusting relationships with parents. The time spent on relationships is critical. Without it, empowerment will not occur. However, the process for creating such relationships goes against the action-oriented nature of schools. Building trusting relationships with parents, particularly parents who have historically not been included, means sitting among parents without an agenda for as long as it takes for parents to believe that the school truly wants to

know them and work with them. It means providing

**The time spent on relationships is critical. Without it, empowerment will not occur.**

there are no designated parent representatives. Rather, all events and meetings are open to all parents. Whatever the configuration, the key is that parents, not school officials, determine the group's makeup. The parent group and the school are interdependent. This means the group does not need the official sanction of school officials to do its work.

At the same time, it is not a rogue group operating at cross-purposes with the school. It is a group of parents who are knowledgeable about the school and are organized in such a way that they can both support the school and challenge the school to better serve the children and youth in the community.

Creating such a group takes concerted effort. There must be a person dedicated solely to this task because it is complex. In order to empower parents,

parents with the information they ask for, even if that information is something the school would rather parents did not know. It means providing space for parents to do their work so they feel as if they are part of the school rather than intruders.

Getting to the point where parents believe the school is committed to parent empowerment typically takes months, if not years. Schools want results quickly, so efforts to develop authentic collaborations with parents are often abandoned before they have an opportunity to succeed. This only serves to reinforce the perspective that schools do not value all parents.

When schools succeed at parent empowerment, it is because they make a commitment and stick to it, even when it gets hard. They identify a person to work on parent empowerment, and they

do not ask that person to do other work. They make resources and information available to parents without requiring a complicated request for information process. They include parents in all aspects of decision making, even areas that have traditionally been the exclusive purview of schools. They respond to parent input, and they value the assets parents bring. In short, they make parents an integral part of the school.

When schools share power with parents and families, authentic, mutually beneficial relationships result. Suspicion, anger, and distrust fade and are replaced by caring, trusting, and supportive relationships. Working closely with parents, educators get to know them and realize that all parents value and want to be involved in their children's education. At the same time, parents learn educators have their children's best interests in mind but work under challenging conditions.

Understanding each other's circumstances, parents and educators realize that by working together, they can better meet the needs of students and families in the community as well as those of educators.

Sharing these vulnerabilities is scary at first, but over time ultimately results in understanding, empathy, and trust between parents and educators and a sense of shared responsibility for students and for each other. When a concern or need arises, parents and educators know they can count on each other to address the issue at hand without blame or judgment.

Valued for their knowledge, skills, and resources, parents truly feel like an equal partner, and this acceptance in turn sparks additional interest and involvement.

Receiving assistance and a vote of confidence from parents, teachers feel supported and in turn welcome more involvement and collaboration. The ultimate outcome is better schools. ■