

# Maryland emphasizes the value of family and community involvement

*As told to Valerie von Frank*

**A**s educators, we have to always bear in mind that we are building partnerships — with families, community members, all stakeholders. The state's role in helping reach out to stakeholders is to set the tone and lead the way.

We began the Maryland Parent Advisory Council in late fall 2003 to support a statewide goal of involving families more. We put together a group of parents and others and asked, “What should we as a state and as districts be doing to assist parents?”

Once the council finished its work, we wanted continued input from community stakeholders on educational matters, so we created a Superintendent's Family Engagement Council of 12 members, 10 of whom are parents and two who are external partners who meet two to three times a year.

In addition, each school system submits a Bridge to Excellence plan annually through legislative mandate, and we added a question there for districts to specify how they are providing professional development for instructional and noninstructional staff around family and community partnerships.

Another outgrowth of the council was a second full-time position at the state department for a specialist in family involvement. Both staff members work continuously at the district and school levels to provide staff development that helps educators in the field better connect with parents and community members as valu-

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able resources in supporting student achievement.

We are a small state of 24 school districts and so we are able to do a lot of capacity building within the systems. We get many questions from districts and schools about how to work with parents who may not speak the language or understand the American education system. We have created the Maryland English Language Learner Family Involvement Network that sponsors regular networking opportunities, professional development, and an annual conference around solutions to parent involvement concerns. Joyce Epstein's National Network of Partnership Schools at Johns Hopkins University has recognized the network as an example of best practices in family and community involvement.

We work hard to provide opportunities for stakeholders across the state to share strategies. We have the Maryland Alliance for Family Involvement in Education, which brings educators together for professional development twice a year around specific topics. The alliance is a partnership with the state department, the state PTA, the MidAtlantic Equity Consortium — which was our former Parental Information and Resource Center — and other stakeholders.

Maryland is the only state in the country that has a Parent Involvement Matters Award, similar to Teacher of the Year. We recognize a parent from each of the 24 districts. We have a detailed process for determining who those honorees are. We choose five finalists and interview them before selecting the winner. We have had great feedback about how important that is. That's something that could be easily overlooked, but it strengthens the perspective on parent involvement — and it empowers parents. One of our award winners is on that school board now.



The state department makes sure that an internal team meets monthly across programs to share informally and to look for opportunities for coordination. That group includes program staff from Title 1, Title 3, special education, public libraries, after school programs, student services, early childhood, and correctional institutions.

Our job at the state level is to emphasize with educators the value of family and community involvement. It's one of those things educators understand cognitively, but we must make it make sense not just in their heads, but in their hearts.

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