

# THE LEARNING Principal

FOR A DYNAMIC COMMUNITY OF SCHOOL LEADERS ENSURING SUCCESS FOR ALL STUDENTS

## *a* COMMUNITY of **LEARNERS**

*Two viewpoints, one journey*

BY PATRICIA WRIGHT AND BETH WARREN

**B**uilding a learning community is a process that involves creating a school culture built on mutual respect, collegiality, collaboration, celebration, shared leadership, and shared responsibility.

*Patricia Wright and Beth Warren*

*shared in the experience of transforming Robert Frost Elementary School in East Brunswick, N.J., into a professional learning community. In this conversation, they discuss that process. Wright, who was principal, describes how she engaged the staff in a shared vision for high levels of achievement for all students. Teacher Beth Warren describes her reaction to those changes.*



**Patricia Wright**  
Principal



**Beth Warren**  
Teacher

**Patricia Wright:**

Years of experience as a teacher had taught me the impact, both positive and negative, that leadership has on a school community. As I assumed my first principalship, I knew I wanted to establish a safe, respectful, and productive learning environment for all students and staff. My

goal was to be an instructional leader who created a dialogue about learning. I was thrilled when I saw that the mission statement of my new school claimed, "We are a community of learners."

**Beth Warren:** The staff had been on one big roller-coaster ride. After several principals, each with a different style and philosophy, the staff

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► **See Page 4 for a tool that can help you evaluate parent involvement in your school.**

## Lead family involvement, lead student success

**G**rappaling with the difficult issue of uninvolved parents is often a challenge for educators. Each of us has probably been intimately involved with our own children's education. We were successful as students ourselves. Let's face it: We love school! We've been attentive to homework, attended PTA, had conversations and attended school meetings with teachers, volunteered as class parents, attended assemblies, chaperoned field trips, or served on school councils — to name a few! Most of us have probably developed a keen understanding of the social and political structures in schools. We used this knowledge to advocate and strategically navigate those systems in order to promote advantages (reward) for our children.

We know that students with parents or guardians who are involved in their schooling beyond sending them to school demonstrate greater academic and social success. We can relate to this truth from our experience as students and as parents.

But what about parents who were not successful as students themselves? Their lives may be replete with negative experiences that have become the blueprint that governs their actions or inactions. What skills do they need to promote the different outcomes for their children? These parents are marginalized by the very system that stands as a beacon of hope for their children. Some of us have concluded that this complex issue is beyond our "locus of control." I propose that it is not.

What is it that principals need to know and be able to do to influence family involvement?

A starter list for the principal who wants to reshape his or her beliefs and behaviors might look like this:

- Create a "no excuses" school culture of

family involvement. Walk this, talk this, fund this, support this, and monitor this fundamental cornerstone.

- Create expectations that educators in your school will embed in their curriculum strategies that enable them to know their students, their students' community, and their students' family interests. Use strategies such as writing, cooperative projects, student interest/value surveys, and interviews to help educators gain a greater understanding of the student and family background.
- Establish a mantra that "all students bring from their home environment and prior experiences strengths that we can build upon in teaching the standards of today." Support educators who are stuck and can't identify ways to connect to children and families.
- Create a menu of opportunities that will involve families in enhancing student learning. Ask families to add to this list.
- Connect educators with the community by developing relationships with religious programs, community recreation centers, and local businesses.
- Identify retired educators (teachers, administrators, central office, etc.) who can be surrogate parents for students. Pair these individuals who know how to navigate the system with families who are typically marginalized from the system.
- Ensure that teachers have access to professional learning on the socio-cultural factors and strategies that enhance student learning.

Principals can open portals to increased family involvement that promote student success. It is not about a magic bullet. It is about shifting beliefs and boundaries that have hindered educational progress for some families, generation after generation.



Pat Roy is co-author of *Moving NSDC's Staff Development Standards Into Practice: Innovation Configurations* (NSDC, 2003)

Learn more about NSDC's standards, [www.nsd.org/standards/index.cfm](http://www.nsd.org/standards/index.cfm)

#### REFERENCE

*Overview of Research on Family Involvement in Children's Learning.* (www.ed.gov/pubs/PFIE/conrsrch.html)

# Family involvement: A far cry from room mothers and cupcakes

I'm afraid when it comes to family involvement many educators remain mired in the idea that parents should be like the family portrayed in *Leave It to Beaver!* June was always available for her kids, made meals from scratch, and always checked their sons' homework. I'm not sure that this "traditional" family ever existed except on television. The demographics of families are different now. Our idea of family involvement must also change.

A key concept in the rationale of the Family Involvement standard is that educators need to *learn* how to develop partnerships with families and caregivers in order to meaningfully support the education of their children. This seems a far cry from asking mothers to bring in cupcakes and make copies of worksheets for the classroom. A key task for principals, according to this standard, is to **learn about and implement strategies that increase family involvement.**

The principal and school faculty can **educate families about strategies that support student learning at home.** Family involvement does not require that parents be physically present in the school building. According to studies (www.ed.gov), what parents do at home has twice as strong an influence on children's achievement as does a family's socioeconomic status. When parents are informed, they can reinforce classroom instruction at home and reinforce concepts through naturally occurring situations. For example, if a student is working on measurement, parents can involve children in

home improvement projects that use measurement authentically.

**The school can sponsor parent education workshops on child development and identify home conditions that support learning.** Parents may need to understand how reading with their children; discussing daily events from the newspaper, online news, or television; or monitoring the amount of time spent watching television or playing videogames impacts learning in school. "Helicopter parents" who

hover over their children's experiences and development may need to learn about deferring gratification and how children build self-esteem and self-concept.

**The principal should also ensure that there is strong communication with families about school programs and student progress.** This information includes report cards, grading practices, school events, student work, and homework. Technology

has played an important role in this communication in some schools. All this information can be posted on a secured web site so parents can learn about student grades, homework completion, and other school information. Because this technology is not universal, the principal will still need to work at ensuring that parents are provided information about student progress through more traditional means.

While the principal can hope for and expect family involvement because it is important to student achievement, a more proactive stance is to learn how to develop parents' knowledge, skills, and actions so that they support education at home.

#### FAMILY INVOLVEMENT

Staff development that improves the learning of all students provides educators with knowledge and skills to involve families and other stakeholders appropriately.

# PARENT INVOLVEMENT CHECKLIST

## Comment to facilitators

Use this checklist to help your school improvement committee or action team identify its current parent involvement practices. Team members should work together to fill out the checklist. Calculate your responses using the scoring guidelines on Page 5. Then initiate a discussion about which practices should be maintained, eliminated, or improved in order to enhance parent involvement in your school.

**“Many things can wait; the child cannot. Now is the time his bones are being formed, his mind is being developed. To him, we cannot say tomorrow; his name is today.”**

— Gabriela Mistral

**“We must not, in trying to think about how we can make a big difference, ignore the small daily differences we can make which, over time, add up to big differences that we often cannot foresee.”**

— Marian Wright Edelman

**“If we don’t change the direction we’re going, we’re likely to end up where we are headed.”**

— Chinese proverb

## DIRECTIONS

Record your YES or NO responses to the following questions. As you fill out the checklist, collect sample material that illustrates the answer (such as a copy of your parent involvement plan, a pupil progress report form, an attendance sheet from a school function).

## PARENT INVOLVEMENT PLAN

### Yes No

- 1. Is there a stated commitment to parent involvement, such as a directive, policy, or guideline?
- 2. Are there adequate resources (funding, staff) to support parent involvement activities?
- 3. Is there a parent involvement coordinator?
- 4. Is there a written plan for parent involvement?
- 5. Is there provision in the plan for staff training in all aspects of parent involvement?
- 6. Is there provision in the plan for data collection, program monitoring, and evaluation?
- 7. Did parents help develop the plan?

## OUTREACH

### Yes No

- 8. Are special efforts made to involve men and women from different racial and national origin groups in all parent activities?
- 9. Have linkages been made with community organizations and religious groups which serve the families of children enrolled in your school?
- 10. Are liaisons or interpreters available from different national origin groups to help with parent involvement activities if needed?
- 11. Is a particular effort made to involve

male family members in school activities?

- 12. Do some parent involvement activities take place in the community?

## SCHOOL POLICY AND PROCEDURES

### Yes No

- 13. Is there a parent advisory council? Are parents represented on school advisory council(s)?
- 14. Are members of advisory council(s) representative of the school population by race, gender, and national origin?
- 15. Are parents trained to be effective council members?
- 16. Are parents involved in developing educational goals and objectives for the school?
- 17. Are parents involved in developing school procedures and rules?
- 18. Are parents involved in developing pupil progress reporting forms and procedures?

## SCHOOL-SPONSORED PARENT ACTIVITIES

### Yes No

- 19. Are parents welcomed into the school on a daily basis as observers, volunteers, and resources?
- 20. Is a PTO/PTA active in your school?
- 21. Are parents involved in developing school sponsored parent and family activities?
- 22. Are there educational activities and training for parents which enable them to work with their own child at home?
- 23. Are there social activities for parents and families?

24. Are there ways for parents to help the school (fundraising, paint/fix up, etc.)?
25. Are there adult education classes for parents (ESL, GED, exercise classes, etc.)?
26. Is there an updated file of community services and resources for parents and families (health, social services, financial aid, emergency assistance, etc.)?
27. Are child care arrangements made for school meetings and other parent activities if needed?
28. Are there parent recognition programs for service to the school?

### COMMUNICATING WITH PARENTS

#### Yes No

29. Do teachers make an effort to communicate regularly and positively with parents?
30. Is there a regular school newsletter with information for parents?
31. Are parent communications written clearly and simply (at a 6th to 8th grade level) using language the family can understand?
32. Are school procedures and rules clearly communicated to parents at the beginning of each year or when children are enrolled?

### REPORTING CHILDREN'S PROGRESS TO PARENTS

#### Yes No

33. Do teachers make an effort to say positive things about the child and emphasize the child's strengths in their progress reports to parents?
34. Are teacher concerns about their child's progress communicated clearly to parents?
35. Do parents participate in decisions affecting their child's education (classroom placement, course selection)?
36. Are all educational options for their child explained clearly to parents?
37. Are meetings arranged at the parents' request to discuss parent concerns regarding their child?
38. Are parent-teacher conferences scheduled at times convenient to the parents and teachers?
39. Are transportation arrangements made for parents to attend parent-teacher conferences if needed?

## Scoring

Three separate scales are used to help you rate your organization on parent involvement.

### PROGRAM FUNDAMENTALS

Count one point for each YES answer to questions 1, 3, 4, 7, 8, 13, 16, 21, 29, 35.

**7-10 points:** Congratulations! You have a well planned program in place.

**4-6 points:** You have the elements of a good parent involvement program on which to build a comprehensive program.

**0-3 points:** You are missing the planning needed for an effective parent involvement program. Persuade school officials to commit the resources to begin a comprehensive program.

### EQUITY

Count one point for each YES answer to questions 8, 9, 10, 11, 12, 14, 27, 31, 38, 39.

**9-10 points:** Bravo! Equity is an important part of your parent involvement program.

**4-8 points:** Although you have considered some equity issues when designing your program, you must do more to address race, gender, and national origin concerns.

**0-3 points:** You need to rethink the equity of your parent involvement program to attract diverse parents to school activities.

### RANGE OF ACTIVITIES

Count one point for each YES answer to questions 2, 5, 6, 15, 17, 18, 19, 20, 22, 23, 24, 25, 26, 28, 30, 32, 33, 34, 36, 37.

**14-20 points:** Keep up the good work! You have an excellent range of parent involvement activities. Monitor them to ensure that they continue to appeal to diverse parent interests.

**8-13 points:** You have some good parent involvement activities in place. New activities should be developed with community input in order to bring additional groups of parents into the school.

**0-7 points:** You need to increase the range of parent involvement activities to bring more parents into the school. Read the recommended resources on Page 7 to expand your knowledge about parent involvement. Form a parent advisory group.

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## A community of learners: Two viewpoints, one journey

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was scattered in their thinking and their practice. Although we were a group of talented professionals, we were all working in different directions. There was an overall feeling of negativity and a lack of common goals.

**Wright:** I spent the first few months listening and observing. I realized that not only were the teachers not talking about teaching and learning, some were not talking to each other at all! A staff and student survey revealed that student discipline was an area of concern. I decided to use this area to develop our first common school goal. The collective dialogue began. A group of interested teachers volunteered to be our character education core team. Discussions at faculty meetings led to the staff's conclusion that any character education efforts had to be directly tied to the school's discipline policy. Another collaborative team was born — one that took on the job of revising the existing discipline policy. Still another committee was formed to develop schoolwide activities to support our initiative. We planned lessons that taught students the importance of respect and the steps of conflict resolution. The No. 1 school rule became respect for everyone in the school community. The staff modeled that rule and the core program lessons of anti-bullying and conflict resolution daily.

**Warren:** Having a common purpose gave us the opportunity to begin to work together. I was excited. There was a cautious feeling of optimism. Not only were we seeing a difference in student behavior, but we also began to shift our attitudes as we modeled respectful behavior and conflict resolution strategies. Communication improved and a dialogue focused on school improvement was begun.

**Wright:** As principal, I took part in every committee. My character education core team and I attended conflict resolution training, and we used faculty meetings to train the rest of the staff. Students were taught these skills so they could solve problems peacefully. The same skills were used by the adults as they worked side-by-side on this initiative. Within a few months, teachers saw an improvement in the school

climate. This was due not only to the students' response to our efforts, but also to a renewed sense of collaboration and mutual respect among the staff. We had tackled a problem together, and we had met success.

**Warren:** Although I was receptive to the development of new committees, I was skeptical that they would make a significant impact. Throughout the years, I had served on numerous groups charged by the leader with the responsibility for some school change. Rarely did the leader take part in the actual committee work. I was impressed with the new principal's full participation in committee discussions. This led to decisions that actually had an impact on the daily life of the school. For example, her participation in our character education initiative allowed her to effectively reinforce those lessons when dealing with discipline in the office. What a novel idea! Everyone was on the same page! I was eager to participate because I knew my ideas were valued. As trust built, more teachers took responsibility for their group's work by voicing concerns and sharing ideas.

**Wright:** The dialogue started, the climate improved, and it was time to focus on learning. I initiated a professional book club. Teachers would leave a session and try ideas in their classrooms, come back, and share both successes and failures. As teachers engaged, they learned more about each other personally and professionally. In the process, they were building trust and the school culture was changing from one of isolation to one of collaboration. As they reflected on research and practice, the group defined a problem. We did not approach the teaching of reading comprehension consistently across grade levels and contents. The group then worked on a solution. They developed a set of active reading strategies and shared them at a faculty meeting. Posters of the strategies were made for every classroom. Ultimately, the strategies became part of the districtwide literacy curriculum and our teachers led summer workshops to share their ideas with others across the district.

**Warren:** My colleagues and I realized that we had the power to effect change by working

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**"We realized we could learn more from each other that we could from any one-day workshop."**

— Beth Warren,  
teacher

**"Without even realizing it, I was honing my ability to lead."**

— Beth Warren,  
teacher

# A community of learners: Two viewpoints, one journey

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collaboratively. I was taking ideas directly from our book club sessions and immediately applying the strategies in my classroom. Book club members realized we could learn more from each other than we could from any one-day workshop. The sharing of craft knowledge fostered an excitement for professional learning. Other teachers from the district, as well as other school communities, visited our classrooms extending our learning community outside our own school's walls.

**Wright:** Together, the staff and I identified other areas of need. School goals were collectively developed and Professional Improvement Plans were written. Teachers chose to work in focus groups on areas of interest. These groups met regularly to read and reflect on current research. Classrooms became laboratories as teachers implemented new ideas and provided feedback on results. Teachers examined student work and used data to drive instruction. The groups had the opportunity to share successful strategies with the entire staff at faculty meetings. Even the most reluctant teacher could not help but be drawn into the process as their peers set new standards for instruction.

**Warren:** The school was alive with discussion that focused on instruction. In the halls, the faculty room, and even the parking lot, I often heard, "Did you try..." or "You should see what my students did!" or "Can I come in and see that lesson?" The principal was part of the dialogue. She visited my classroom to see the impact that the focus group discussions were having on student learning. She encouraged my colleagues and me by her consistent involvement, whether it meant finding a book that supported a project, sharing success stories, or arranging for class coverage so we could observe in each others' classrooms. Classroom doors were wide open and teacher isolation was a thing of the past. Observations took on a new life because the principal could relate the content of my lesson directly to my professional development experiences and talk with me about my changing practice.

**Wright:** I was not only the leader but the

lead learner. In the beginning, I attended every focus group meeting. As more groups developed and teachers became more confident in their collaboration skills, they took on leadership roles as facilitators and recorders. They scheduled their own meetings, sent e-mail updates to members, and ensured that the rest of the staff was kept up-to-date on their work.

**Warren:** My professional development experiences provided me with knowledge, tools, and strategies that impacted student learning. Slowly, I also developed a new skills set. I realized the power of active listening, conflict resolution, constructivist facilitation, and organizational skills. Without even realizing it, I was honing my ability to lead. I was empowered by the potential a professional learning community had to change teaching and learning, school climate, and myself.

**Wright:** This will be my last year as principal of this school. Looking back, I realize how much I have grown as a leader. At a recent faculty meeting, the staff reflected on our accomplishments. All agreed that their active participation in our professional learning community played a key role in our success. I explained that many things in the school had changed, but, most importantly, they had changed. The ability to continue the journey belongs to them.

**Warren:** I have applied what I have learned to my new role as a district supervisor. Facilitating learning communities is a priority for me because it is a promising practice that nurtures professional growth and enhances student achievement. I currently bring grade-level teachers together and implement the model of collaboration that I learned from my principal. I can now use my knowledge to help other teachers become leaders who affect change in their school communities.

**Wright:** As a new principal enters the building, he or she will hear teachers talking, and I am sure they will continue to talk about what matters most — learning! They have truly become a community of learners who have created their own cycle of continuous school improvement. ■

This fall, Wright and Warren are in different jobs. Wright has become superintendent of Spring Lake (N.J.) Public Schools and Warren has become supervisor of language arts in East Brunswick (N.J.) Public Schools.

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**Online vs. face-to-face learning**

“Research shows us that online learning and face-to-face learning complement each other in interesting ways. Some people who are silent in face-to-face professional development sessions find their voice in online interactions, for a variety of reasons. Online learning can also extend time ... because it

allows (teachers) to do professional development when they want, where they want. ... What online learning doesn't always provide is somebody right down the hall from you. Sometimes you want to get together ... with somebody else who's going through the same experience. If professional development is all online, you lose some emotional and social immediacy. The best professional development is not face-to-face only or online only, it's both.

“We don't have any reason to believe that face-to-face professional development is automatically better at helping teachers transform their roles and practices than online learning is. What we do know is that transformation is an intellectual, emotional, and social process, and that having strong support on all three dimensions is necessary, whether it's online or face-to-face.”

**Source:** “Online professional development for teachers,” by Chris Dede, *Harvard Education Letter*, July/August 2006.

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