

Outstanding Educators and Citizens: Improving the Connection Between Our Public Schools and Our Communities

BY GARY R. CHANDLER

Educators across the United States are finding new ways to bridge the communication gaps that often exist among themselves, parents, and other community members. As a result, entire communities are coming together to build safe, seamless, and supportive learning environments for youth. In 2003, the MetLife Foundation and the National Civic League created the Ambassadors in Education Award program to recognize public middle and high school educators who work to strengthen their schools and their surrounding communities by building relationships among all stakeholders.

This article highlights some of the outstanding examples of community-building activities implemented by educators who earned the Ambassador in Education award in 2003, 2004, and 2005. Hopefully, their actions will inspire others to follow.

The readiness of the next generation of leaders is a critical component of a healthy community. High school dropouts and graduates unprepared for college or work can fuel an increased unemployment rate, reduced business development opportunities, higher cost associated with crime and incarceration, reduced disposable income among residents, reduced tax base for community services, and greater costs for human service agencies. Despite these negative impacts, many public schools across the United States are struggling with record enrollments that could surpass fifty-four million students by 2008. Although teachers, administrators, and policymakers are largely responsible for the quality of education, no school can single-handedly increase student achievement, reduce the dropout

rate, solve the teacher shortage, or ensure that students are ready to learn.

A successful educational environment integrates the efforts of families, schools, and a variety of institutions within the community. Many schools and communities understand this philosophy, but developing successful working relationships among stakeholders is often challenging.

“We have found that families and members of the community want to be involved in the school,” said *Kenneth Hunter*, the principal at Prosser Career Academy in Chicago. “The challenge for the school is to develop meaningful and mutually beneficial interactions between the school, families, and the community.”

In many cases, it's up to educators to initiate, influence, and manage all of these relationships to make them supportive and productive. Schools that improve the quality of their partnership programs often report that fewer students are sent to the principal, earn detention, or receive in-school suspensions. These findings suggest that schools' overall efforts to improve relationships with families and the community may help improve students' behavior in school.

Improving Connections Between Families and Educators

The two most influential forces in a child's development are the family and the school. Children thrive academically when the family and the school agree that they are stronger together than apart. Unfortunately, many principals and teachers feel

unprepared to engage families in the educational improvement process. In fact, 70 percent of teachers surveyed in a 2002 study by the MetLife Foundation felt that relationships with parents were too adversarial.

The Ambassadors in Education Award program recognizes public middle and high school educators who work to strengthen their schools and their surrounding communities by building relationships among all stakeholders.

“Parents can be our greatest allies or our worst enemies,” said *Phyllis Turner*, a teacher at Benjamin S. Carson Honors Preparatory School in Atlanta. “Most importantly, parents can offer insight that teachers can’t get from a college textbook. They also can offer us assistance and support that no one else can provide.”

Schools must establish the tone and context for productive home-school partnerships by meeting families more than halfway. Educators need to convey goals, philosophies, and policies that integrate parents’ perspectives and skills into school life. School efforts to promote family and community engagement will succeed only if educators are adequately prepared to support them. When schools successfully engage parents and guardians in the educational process, there are often positive effects on grades, courses completed, attendance, good behavior, and preparedness for class. Plus, these activities continue to reinforce the relationship between educators and families.

“Schools are not always seen as the most inviting and welcoming of places,” said Kenneth Hunter. “If the school can be warm and open, offering added value to the community, it makes the job of educators much easier. Educators must try to make the school of value to the community. Open the building to the community and parents and build relationships with them.”

Educators have discovered a variety of practices that can improve teacher-parent communications and increase family involvement in learning activities. It can be as simple as letting parents know how and when to contact teachers. Other practices include issuing progress reports to parents between report cards, conducting workshops on academic topics, outlining school expectations, and inviting parents to assemblies that celebrate achievement.

It is important for educators to consider the culture, language, and diverse needs and strengths of families to support their children’s education. Once educators develop relationships and trust among parents, they are more likely to get parents involved in the education process. Practices that encourage parent-student interaction at home are often associated with a gain in the percentage of students scoring at the satisfactory proficiency level or higher—for example, assigning homework that involves families or offering lending libraries with related materials for families and students to use at home.

Richard McClure is a former principal at Mauldin High School, Greenville, South Carolina, who conducted focus groups with parents and other stakeholders to identify problems and opportunities within the school. With the help of a steering committee, he founded Bridging the Gap, an effort that included minority parents, staff, and community members. Two Sunday meetings were held for the parents of minority students. Child care and transportation were provided to allow as many parents as possible to attend these important meetings. McClure listened to their concerns during monthly meetings and recorded the information for use in implementing the program. His efforts improved relationships with parents and academic performance by students.

“I wanted to know if the school could more effectively meet the academic needs of their children,” explained McClure. “Ultimately, my goal was to better serve minority students. I wanted to make cer-

tain that minority parents had access to adequate information upon which they could plan for the academic futures of their children. This included providing performance data, available school services, career information, how the scheduling process worked, the structure and implication of curriculum choices, and the financial requirements of postsecondary education.”

The dialogue between the parents and school personnel enhanced relationships, improved confidence in the school, and created an atmosphere of openness that was lacking before, said McClure. “Communications are fundamental to building trust, which underlies the strength of any relationship,” he said.

Thomas Cason, principal of Soldan International Studies High School in St. Louis, made regular visits to the homes of some students who needed support in achieving academic, social, or personal goals. “Visiting their homes is one way for me to learn more about them and a way to get parents more involved in their child’s education,” he said. “In the majority of circumstances, I have found home visits to be very helpful and productive when the intent is to improve relationships and show parents and students that I care. One must make sure that parents and students understand that home visits by the principal are not a consequence for negative student behavior but rather a genuine effort to support the student over the long term.”

Some of these visits have taken Cason to areas of the city that are considered dangerous. He found that even in the roughest housing projects students looked out for his property and personal safety once they knew the purpose of his visit. “They are usually surprised that I would embark on an endeavor such as this, but they usually applaud my efforts,” he said. “I have data on each student and parents are very receptive to my visit. From time to time a student may feel uncomfortable knowing that I am aware of his or her living conditions. However, this

uneasiness soon subsides when we begin to focus on the relationship that we’ve already established. I would not suggest that all principals make home visits. However, I believe that making home visits has made me a better principal.”

Phyllis Turner organized workshops for parents to improve their life skills. She also established parent involvement initiatives and met monthly with representatives from the local housing authority, residents association, housing project board, and Emory University to plan those outreach strategies. In 2001, Turner was charged with writing and implementing the school’s first parental involvement plan. Teachers were required to call each student’s parents within the first two weeks of school, followed by a weekly call to parents of students who were not progressing. Parents were given the opportunity to volunteer as daily greeters, hallway and cafeteria monitors, school switchboard operators, clerical workers, and chaperones. Parents also participated in training workshops and offered input by serving on the parent involvement committee. Turner felt the effort was successful when parents took charge of the annual teacher appreciation celebration, furnishing gifts and a continental breakfast.

As these award-winning examples illustrate, educators can overcome nonsupportive adversarial relationships with families. Although these relationships can be challenging at first, they pay dividends to all stakeholders. Schools and homes that share perspectives, resources, goals, information, and the task of teaching give children the stability, consistency, and encouragement they need for academic success. Schools and families that work together can build the developmental assets available to youth, which makes the educational process more efficient and effective.

Improving Connections Between Community Sectors and Schools

There is a growing recognition among educators that better partnerships between community-based

organizations need to be established, but as winners of the Ambassador in Education Award have learned, school-community relationships are not easy to develop and sustain. Educators can be so overwhelmed with the demands of accountability that they don't recognize how community members can help.

Community builders often do not understand the education system they hope to help, or the magnitude of the challenge. Such differences lead to friction that can make it difficult for community-building organizations and schools to work together.

As educators know, basic issues arise from differences in organizational size, structure, and staffing between schools and community organizations. Community builders can find the school bureaucracy frustrating, while their lack of knowledge about the educational process may frustrate educators.

As suggested by both research and practice, schools have the opportunity to change how communities support the educational system and process. The Ambassadors in Education Award program has highlighted many instances of educators developing productive relationships with community members and organizations.

"Aligning the school and community is a difficult task when there has been a practice of isolation by the various stakeholders," said *Albert Holland*, principal of Boston's Health Careers Academy. "Getting started is the toughest step, especially when you're overwhelmed by the demands from the school district or state. However, having a strategic planning process is a key to involving all key stakeholders, which starts with your students, parents, staff, and partners."

Holland manages a partnership between Boston Public Schools and Northeastern University, which created the school for students who want to pursue a career in health sciences. He helped secure funding

from companies in the Greater Boston area, among them TJX, Blue Cross Blue Shield, Brigham's and Women's hospitals, Massachusetts Health Commission, Boston Children's Hospital, and the Massachusetts Bay Transit Authority. Through these partnerships, the school is able to hold after-school programs and give scholarships to students. Thanks to these corporate relationships, the school also created a Dress for Success program.

"Involving and listening to all the stakeholders is important, and coming up with an engagement process and plan must be inclusive, and you must take the lead," said Holland. "It is critical to work as well as to communicate with parents and community not only as stakeholders but also as teachers. Our children not only learn at school but they learn at home and in their communities."

Gregory Vallone, the former principal at James Monroe High School in Los Angeles, fostered partnerships with schools, community organizations, and area businesses. As a result, school-to-career programs in nursing, culinary arts, robotics, animation, and film production have been created or expanded. He also developed the school's University Preparatory Program, which brings rigorous math and science instruction, links to the business community, and connections to California State Northridge, to help students attend college. Under his direction, the school also established relationships with Whole Foods Markets and One Service Center to help the students and educators at the school develop healthier eating habits.

Kevin McCarthy, a former principal at Robinson High School in Tampa, Florida, brought together the Tampa Housing Authority, government officials, school district personnel, and the school's community to address the need for improved housing in a neighborhood across the street from the school. This dialogue led to a land swap between the school and the Housing Authority for the benefit of all community stakeholders. He was also very involved in the

neighborhood chamber of commerce. He worked with the local air force base to form the McDill Aeronautical Academy, an aviation program for students at his school. He helped forge a partnership between the school district and the Military Child Coalition, to help transition the children of military families before and after base transfers.

In 1991 and 1992, the media was full of unfavorable stories about Denver Public School students. “Public opinion was that our students were underachieving and lacking discipline, which was offensive to me,” said *Steve Finesilver*. “I had taught and coached for more than a dozen years. The children that I had worked with were motivated, hardworking, and had pride, loyalty, and respect for others.”

In late 1992 and early 1993, Finesilver and a colleague started Jobs By George. Their goal was to find jobs for eight or nine diligent students to work doing manual labor and provide community service near the school. They made more than a dozen appointments with businesses to offer jobs to their students.

“The initial appointments and presentations were met with disbelief, and at times sarcasm,” he recalled. “It was clear that many businesses were not yet willing to give our students an opportunity for employment. Finally, we secured agreements to keep eight students working for the summer. Dutifully, they performed their community service and earned their paychecks and school credit. Since 1999, we have employed 80 to 105 students each summer and we have provided scholarships for students who have put in three or more years of exemplary service.

“Jobs By George involves parents during the application, hiring, and orientation process. Parents are strong advocates of hard work, responsibility, and young people having summer employment. Without parental involvement, it would be impossible for Jobs By George to succeed.”

In 2004 and 2005, the program was expanded to employ students from eight school districts and twenty colleges and universities. Jobs By George has evolved without large grants or public funding and has employed hundreds of young people. The program owns construction equipment and a huge array of tools and machinery. College students now administer Jobs By George.

Finesilver’s advice to other educators who might consider similar programs: “Be persistent and willing to face rejection. People are not automatically willing to give youngsters a chance or an opportunity. It’s essential to communicate and work with parents and community members.”

Principal Hunter started the Chicago school’s Service Learning Advisory Board to foster service learning opportunities for students. Through this program, the school built productive relationships with numerous organizations, including the Red Cross, the Northwest Neighborhood Federation, Mather Café, and Hanson Elementary School. Educators meet with these community organizations and others regularly. Hunter also recruited the local alderman to serve on the Local School Council and to help connect the school to the community.

“As a kid in school, I found that much of what I was learning was disconnected from the experience in the wider world,” said Hunter. “To me it just seemed that connecting the school to the community in which it resides made sense. Our kids come from outside the school, return to homes outside the school. Therefore my school, or any school, must have connectivity to the real life, the real world in which our students exist.

“Our service learning advisory board has made good connections with community service organizations,” he said. “We are on excellent terms with our community college, and we have partnerships with Steppenwolf Theater, Chicago Children’s Choir, and the Museum Campus, including Shedd Aquarium,

Field Museum, and Adler Planetarium. Our local politicians and business leaders see our school as a real asset to the community,” he said.

Susan Eggleston, a teacher at Riverside High School in Greenville, South Carolina, established relationships with local nonprofits to offer classes on a variety of issues and create professional pathways into the human services field. “It was so exciting to see the students become so involved in the community and to realize how much they got out of volunteering and helping others,” she said. “It added a new spark to teaching.

“Students realize they can make a difference in the lives of others,” she added. “This will hopefully lead them to a life filled with a desire to help others. That is where the real joy comes from, and they gain an appreciation for this at an early age. Is it always successful? No, but you cannot really do anything about that. Just focus on all the positive steps they take.

“Often parents and community members can offer expertise in fields outside the teacher’s scope. I feel that by bringing members of the community into my classes the students get not only what I know but what the experts know, and the students become the true winners,” she said.

Darren Wells, a teacher at J. P. Timilty Middle School in Boston, asked people from area colleges, universities, hospitals, and other organizations to come into the classroom to share their perspectives and experiences with the students. He also recruits volunteers to serve as pen pals to students. “I have been volunteering in the community since my undergraduate days,” he explained. “I try to be involved in many ways, including bike riding for charity, sitting on educational boards and committees, and participating in tutoring and mentoring programs sponsored by community-based organizations. By pursuing my interests and meeting many kinds of people in the process, benefits have come to my students. Free or reduced tickets to events, food, and

in-kind services are just a few of the things that have resulted from my networking in the community.”

Peter Giles, a teacher at Chelsea Vocational School in New York City, drew on his community connections to recruit a variety of people from all walks of life to coach or judge student competitions and convince a nonprofit organization to bring programming into the school. “As soon as I started my teaching position, I knew that the kids were missing out on a lot in school,” he said. “It seemed that all in-school resources were being exhausted, so I realized early on the importance of bringing in outside help through the community.”

Observing adult role models is one of the most important ways in which children learn. Schools can formalize programs that put students in community settings where they can assist, observe, and learn from adult role models. The development and management of opportunities for youth can help educators solidify and refine important relationships with other stakeholders in the community.

Conclusion

To realize the benefits of community collaboration, teachers and principals need to understand all stakeholder groups in the community: families, businesses, nonprofit organizations, human service agencies. This is where many relationships between educators and community members have failed in the past.

The challenges, opportunities, and resources available to solve educational problems are unique to each community. However, when educators, parents, and community stakeholders work collaboratively in pursuit of common goals, the educational environment and outcomes improve accordingly.

In many communities, it’s up to educators to initiate and develop productive relationships with families and other stakeholders in the educational process. Once these relationships are built, however, they can improve student behavior and academic perfor-

mance. These relationships also help the school give back to the community through increased volunteerism and resource sharing. The more developmental assets available to youth, the better the educational outcomes for all.

It takes gifted and dedicated educators to step forward and initiate relationships with parents and community members. As the Ambassadors in Education Award program demonstrates, America's public schools are blessed with some great educators and leaders. Schools and entire communities need to recognize these leaders and encourage them to continue their great work, while inspiring others to follow their examples.

“The community of a school starts with parents, and then includes the immediate community, and is followed by the extended community—the agencies and institutions that play a role in the educational process of our children,” said Albert Holland. “We must come together to educate, nurture, and instill in our students a sense of community. I consider the children I educate as my own children and I want no less for them than I want for my own children.”

Gary R. Chandler is a former director of the Ambassadors in Education Award program.

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