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Monday, July 19, 2010

Can Communities And Parents Help Turn Around Schools?

In a [speech](#) delivered to the NAACP last week, Secretary of Education Arne Duncan called for parents and communities to play a more formal role in the tough work of turning around chronically underperforming schools. The remarks came in the wake of much discussion among educators, policymakers and even some lawmakers that turning around a low-performing school requires a look at circumstances beyond the school building. "Based on your input and the very productive engagement we have had around the school improvement grant program," Duncan said, "we will revise our ESEA reauthorization proposal to require parent and community input."

The required input "means notification, outreach, public input, and honest, open discussion about the right option for each community." Details about how exactly schools would gather input from surrounding communities are unknown.

What do you think is the appropriate way to structure parental and community involvement in the school turnaround program? Is it a meaningful role if they must still choose from the administration's preferred turnaround models?

-- *Eliza Krigman, NationalJournal.com*



18 Responses



Responded on July 22, 2010 7:00 PM

Foster Deep and Authentic Engagement

[Gina Burkhardt](#)

Executive Vice President, American Institutes for Research

We can all agree that community and parent involvement is vitally important in achieving educational excellence. The more interesting questions are if and how the involvement is contributing to school reform in new and innovative ways.

Historically, parents and families became involved in their local school or district as a way to ensure that their own children would benefit. Strong parent and family involvement programs are designed to support students to attend school regularly, get their homework done, develop language and literacy skills, and take and pass the courses they need for college or the workplace. Currently, this role is changing and now, when we talk of parent and community involvement, we are including a range of strategies and opportunities that go well beyond a families' self-interest and instead contribute to a web of learning and development opportunities for everyone.

The administrative core of a district can and often does ensure the efficacy of the educational program and operations, and they do much of this independent of community and parent involvement. For example, they can align the curriculum and tests and ensure instruction is of high quality. They can develop their teachers so they improve and perfect their craft. They can provide academic and enrichment programs that are exciting and stimulating. The value-add of community involvement is most evident when attention shifts from what the school needs to what the students need. Here, community and family engagement becomes critical – to provide complementary support to ensure students are ready and able to learn. At Learning Point Associates we have a new generation of the school transformation model that incorporates a balance of school-based interventions and student-focused support.

We understand that school turnaround and transformation are complex and often misunderstood reform efforts. The good news is that there is a growing body of evaluations and research on these efforts. Emerging are many good examples of how community involvement is substantially supporting school reform and beginning to change the fundamental ways in which schools operate. For instance, the full-service community school model, exemplified by the pioneering work of the Children's Aid Society in New York City, is now also gaining wide traction in Chicago, Cincinnati, and other localities. As Marty Blank describes, community schools centralize resources to ease the burden on families who often don't know how to access such services. When successful, community schools provide connections to integrated support services that help keep students healthy and secure and ready to learn. There is now data from these sites to show that student learning has improved.

The Promise Neighborhood approach, as exemplified by the Harlem Children's Zone and the subject of a recent U.S. Department of Education grant competition that attracted close to 350 applications, is another example of an innovative model. Promise Neighborhoods do not necessarily rely on a school-based approach, but knit together the critical assets available to children and families – or create new services where gaps exist – to provide tailored support for each child and his or her family.

Community assets are being harnessed to provide unprecedented opportunities for learning beyond the school day or outside of the school walls. Initiatives such as Citizen Schools in Boston, Supporting Student Success through Extended Learning Opportunities (SSS-ELO) in New Hampshire, After School Matters in Chicago, and the C.S. Mott Foundation's New Day For Learning are creating partnerships between schools, students, community-based organizations, museums and libraries, and highly talented individuals to offer apprenticeships and internships, project-based learning activities, and cultural and academic enrichment.

Given that we have these – and other – examples of the difference community and parent engagement can make to children's ability to succeed and their school's ability to serve them well, should we require community input? Required parent and community involvement is neither a necessary nor a sufficient condition to ensure meaningful and constructive engagement. The history of Title I PACs shows how easy it is to meet a legal requirement while in many cases offering nothing substantive. The communities that are doing this work are not doing it because it's required; they're doing it because they want their children to succeed. Successful school turnaround and transformation models raise the expectations among teachers and parents of what students can achieve. Schools and districts that establish the processes and structures to foster authentic and deep engagement – from the get-go for those struggling schools embarking on one of the school improvement models – will reap the rewards of their efforts. Let's focus on giving them the tools to get this done rather than requiring that they pay lip service to the idea.



Responded on July 22, 2010 3:49 PM

We must recognize parents as partners

[Deborah A. Gist](#)

Commissioner of Elementary and Secondary Education, Rhode Island

We cannot engage in serious and successful school transformation without encouraging meaningful involvement and broad-based support from community groups, parents, and families. Our [strategic plan](#), “Transforming Education in Rhode Island,” therefore, sets as one of our goals: “Promote active family and community engagement in improving student achievement and success.”

We know that engaged parents and family members can make a tremendous difference in student achievement. Parents develop a foundation for literacy and learning by talking, singing, and reading to children from the time they are babies. Parents are the best advocates for their child’s education, and they can reinforce the importance of education throughout a child’s life.

As teachers and education leaders, we must do more to ensure that our schools foster parent engagement and support our students’ families. As we note in our Rhode Island Department of Education Literacy Policy, we must “recognize families as partners in the education of their children.” Too often, educators complain that parents are not engaged, and at the same time we fail to give parents the opportunity to become engaged with our schools. We have to welcome children and parents into our schools. School should be a joyful place to be, and children and parents should feel at home and comfortable in our schools. That means we need to know our students’ families and greet them by name. We should celebrate with them and support them when they need us.

When, for whatever reason, parents are unable or unwilling to become engaged in our schools, that is when their children need us the most. I do not accept the excuse, which I often hear, that we cannot change our schools until parents change. First of all, I do believe that parents want the very best for their children and that they are doing what they can to provide for them. Also, we have more evidence now than ever before that a high-quality school—and specifically an excellent teacher—can overcome other barriers to provide a great education to every child, regardless of income, family circumstances, or language. We will be even more successful when we have meaningful parent engagement, but we can find success and reach high academic achievement even when we don’t.

When we walk away from the few who blame and make excuses and link arms with our fellow teachers and parents who are ready to do whatever it takes, we will make a difference for our students. We have to embrace the genuine belief that parents want what is best for their children. This really has to be something educators deeply believe. Otherwise, we will have low expectations for parents *and* for our students.

If we truly believe that parents want what is best for their children, we must engage parents as real partners particularly when our schools have failed. In Rhode Island, our [protocol for interventions](#) in the persistently lowest-achieving schools requires that districts engage in community outreach “to engage affected family and community members in the work of reforming affected schools in order to provide students with meaningful choices to access the most effective learning environments possible.”

Our protocol requires that districts with the persistently lowest-achieving schools:

- develop “ongoing mechanisms for meaningful and periodic family and community engagement”; and
- provide students and their families with “usable and accessible information” about schooling options and the school-choice selection process.

Moreover, we require that the superintendent convene a “stakeholder group” to provide input and feedback during the *selection* of the model for school reform and the development of the plan for school transformation. In addition to educators and a school-committee member, the stakeholder group must include a parent, a student, and “representatives of applicable state and local social-service, health, and child-welfare agencies.”

We believe that our protocol does lead to timely notification, broad outreach, meaningful public input, and open and productive public discussion about schooling options available to communities in the process of school turnaround, and we would welcome such a requirement in federal laws or regulations, as described by Secretary Duncan. In fact, Title I does require parent and community engagement with schools, and we agree with this principle. Our experience to date in the two Rhode Island districts involved in school turnaround, Central Falls and Providence, indicates that community representatives and engaged parents can play a key role in articulating the needs of students and ensuring that the plan for school reform will earn enduring support and will close achievement gaps.

For engagement to be meaningful, we must provide opportunities for parents and community members to work directly on issues of policy and practice – and we must proactively solicit and develop a cohort of citizens committed to improving our schools. Parents and community members must be involved in the whole process of transformation, from start to success.

Together, we will make a difference for our students today and for the well-being of our communities in the future.



Responded on July 22, 2010 11:06 AM

Marty Blank Responds

[Eliza Krigman](#)

NationalJournal.com

Marty Blank, president of the Institute for Educational Leadership and director of the Coalition for Community Schools, submitted the following:

The Coalition for Community Schools applauds Secretary Duncan’s call for increased family and community engagement in the business of improving schools. The Secretary has provided the education community an opportunity to craft a cogent community engagement strategy that mobilizes the array of individuals, institutions and other stakeholders that are invested in the success of our schools and have the resources to fuel achievement. We know that strong schools require strong communities and that strong communities require strong schools. Community leaders and residents must have a voice in the decisions that affect student achievement and also must pool their resources to work towards better outcomes for youth.

In our experience the community schools approach is the most effective and efficient vehicle to incorporate the community in the work of the school. Community schools bring together schools and community partners (community-based organizations, family, health and mental health agencies, higher education institutions, and others) to support student success. They are built on five pillars: strong early childhood development experiences, comprehensive services for student and their families, after school and other extended learning opportunities, deep parent and community involvement, and an engaging, real world curriculum. Across the country, schools and communities in [Kansas City](#), [Chicago](#), [Tulsa](#), [Cincinnati](#), and [other places](#), have chosen community schools as the vehicle for family and community engagement, ensuring that our youth graduate high school ready for college, careers, and citizenship.

The community school strategy is used across the country as the vehicle for family and community engagement. In Cincinnati, the district has engaged every neighborhood in a discussion about the future of their schools. Through deep conversations with residents, parents, and local institutions, Cincinnati’s communities helped decide what strategies schools should use, how to make the most of community assets, and how to rebuild aging school buildings. Cincinnati has continued to engage the community by

making every school a community school. In Chicago, which has a long history of community control over schools, community schools partner with lead agencies in their communities to mobilize resources towards improving student outcomes. In Philadelphia, the University of Pennsylvania, an anchor institution, works with communities to improve the conditions for learning at schools while also strengthening communities.

The Secretary and Congress can help communities and parents turn around schools by including specific language for family and community engagement through community schools in all the Titles of a reauthorized ESEA. These principles are currently reflected in the [Full-Service Community Schools Act](#) introduced by House Majority Leader Steny Hoyer (D-MD) and Senator Ben Nelson (D-NE) as well as the recently introduced [DIPLOMA Act](#) by Senator Sherrod Brown (D-OH) and Senator Bernie Sanders (I-VT).

When families, schools, and the community mobilize for results using the community schools strategy, communities are strengthened, families are engaged, and schools improve



Responded on July 21, 2010 6:41 PM

Can you hear me now?

[Jeanne Allen](#)

President, The Center for Education Reform

You want to know a secret? Parents and community leaders have spent decades talking and pressuring and begging for changes to our country's education system until they are blue in the face. Want to hear another one? The education system, to a great extent, has spent as much time – though far less energy – ignoring them.

Why? Because it's easier. Easier than admitting there is a problem. Easier than figuring out a solution. Easier than making a change that might be uncomfortable for a few adults.

Parents have always been the true warriors (and disrupters) in education. They've gotten charter school laws passed, demanded real options to failing schools, been teacher watchdogs where union bargaining agreements hogtie school leaders, and pushed curriculum changes when their kids were being cheated.

True, this brand of education reform came about through community engagement and participation in forums and meetings, but it also took grassroots organizing and camping out in legislative offices – blood, sweat and tears.

Parents already know what's working and what's not, and they're out in droves every single day. Requiring their input as a condition of ESEA reauthorization is, quite frankly, silly. Requiring districts and states to make changes based on their input or risk the loss of funding, now that would make a difference.



Responded on July 21, 2010 3:14 PM

Parent Leader Gwendolyn Samuel Responds

[Eliza Krigman](#)

NationalJournal.com

Gwendolyn Samuel, chairperson, [State of Black CT Alliance](#), submitted the following:

Yes. It will take the collective effort and resources of a community and its parents to turn around schools. Very often the decision makers around what students and their families need are not a part of the

community that will be affected by those decisions. Too often there is no meaningful engagement of the ultimate stakeholders – students, their families and their communities. Secretary Duncan is on the right track. Parents need actual power to transform their input into meaningful action steps toward relevant reform of their schools. ESEA must include not only the requirement for parent engagement but hold schools and districts accountable for ensuring it happens.

That is what makes the "Parent trigger" law in California and Connecticut so important; it gives parents legal power to engage in the transformation of their schools. Parents are not asking to do it alone but in conjunction with, community, young people, educators, teachers, and administrators so that their child's low-quality educational experience becomes a high-quality experience that will produce successful life outcomes. That is a reasonable request. States are certainly within their right to create alternatives to the federal prescription for struggling schools; "Act Concerning Education Reform in Connecticut" does precisely that.

CT's "parent trigger" is composed of majority parents, community leaders, teachers, the school principal and youth membership who collectively have the LEGAL power to transform their low performing school. Enshrining parent's rights into law and policy, to engage and advocate for their children, is the only missing ingredient toward effective parent engagement and meaningful education reform. It aligns the policy and practice with the interests of all stakeholders, while holding education leaders accountable to their clients. School Boards, school and district leaders, can no longer use blanket statements that say "parents don't care" and "are not involved" then when parents clearly demonstrate that they understand quality and demand it, turn a deaf ear.

The State of Black CT Alliance (SBCTA) has been educating parents and communities – particularly poor and minority communities – to assert their interests and their right to demand an equitable and high-quality education for their children. SBCTA's message to parents and low-income communities in the State of Connecticut, and across the country, is that we are the change we are looking for; it begins with our vote for leadership that is aligned with the best interests of our children, our families and our communities.



Responded on July 21, 2010 2:58 PM

Yes On Community & Parental Involvement

[Rep. Judy Chu, D-Calif.](#)

Member of Early Childhood, Elementary and Secondary Education Subcommittee, U.S. House of Representatives

I completely support the spirit of last week's promise from Secretary Duncan to foster "notification, outreach, public input, and honest, open discussion" in communities with chronically underperforming schools. In fact, I'd love to see it incorporated into a revision of the current School Improvement Grant guidelines.

Everyone involved in turnaround has the same goal: building strong schools that produce well-equipped students. Turning stakeholders against one another, like the recent court case between local parents and New York's Chancellor, wastes energy and diverts our focus.

Research demonstrates lasting and sustainable school turnaround only comes when communities take the time to work together, like they did with Boston's Clarence Edwards Middle School. A few years ago, it was on the verge of being shutdown. Today, it's one of the city's highest performing middle schools. In three years, Clarence Edwards reduced its achievement gap with the rest of state by 80 percent in English Language Arts and by two-thirds in Science. Its eighth graders now exceed the state Math proficiency rate by eight points.

The school is in the same building with many of the same teachers, and a student population with virtually identical demographics. So what change, then, caused the Clarence Edwards turnaround?

Well, teachers, union leaders, community organizations, administrators and parents united and pushed for expanded learning time. This development gave the school flexibility to redesign and expand its

school day – creating more opportunities for teacher collaboration and targeted academic support. In short, the community found the solution its unique situation required.

Giving individual communities the flexibility to find the solutions their schools need lies at the heart of turnaround. In addition to the flaws in structure and implementation in the administration’s four turnaround models, each ignores the clear link between socio-economic status and academic achievement. Their stringent rigidity simply doesn’t work and no amount of community or parental involvement will ever change that.

The contributors’ objections about “federal mandates” to require community engagement are way off the mark. What concerns me is the way current standards bar community contributions to these efforts. Because, when we compel the use of restrictive models and tie the hands of administrators, teachers, and parents, we essentially prohibit their meaningful involvement.



Responded on July 21, 2010 2:19 PM

All Education is Local

[Steve Peha](#)

President, Teaching That Makes Sense

Where’s Tip O’Neill when you need him?

There are many things government can do to improve education. Mandating community involvement is not one of them. Community involvement in schools is, by definition, a local issue. The President or the Secretary could use the bully pulpit to preach the virtues of local support for struggling schools. But the operative word here is “local”. When it comes to education, Washington is so far away from everywhere else in America that its power is severely attenuated in this area and its influence merely meddlesome.

I think Mr. Kress expresses the essential risk/reward element very well here: “...when parents set higher expectations for their own children, establish the discipline for more work and effort, and follow through with their children and teachers in the work—this can make a real difference in student and school performance. (Making this happen is a lot easier said than done.)”

One of the many problems with government requirements for community involvement is lack of community ownership. It is perhaps the greatest truth of all political and social action that the most successful and sustainable efforts are the ones people build themselves. The logic that communities can do a lot to help their schools is correct; a government mandate for community involvement is not.

We’re getting closer and closer, it seems to me, to deciding that school isn’t school anymore but a patchwork of miscellaneous social programs that go far beyond teaching and learning. This makes some sense, but only as a well-coordinated and research-proven expansion of the social safety net. With luck and time, we may see efforts like Mr. Canada’s Harlem Children’s Zone yield clear and unambiguous results through programs we can afford to replicate elsewhere. A recently released study showed small gains in student achievement relative to comparable NYC schools but it’s inappropriate to evaluate a program of such broad scope and generational consequence based on a single test score snapshot. To understand how, or if, this model works, we will need to look at much more than year-by-year test score comparisons.

However, Mr. Canada’s work should not be confused with the kind of government mandated community involvement we are discussing this week. In this discussion, I hear Secretary Duncan simply asking people to do more of something that is not well-defined in ways that are not well-coordinated. As the old saying goes, “Vision without action is a daydream, but action without vision is a nightmare.”

For now, let’s keep our eyes on the smaller prize. The issue at hand is not “community turnaround” but “school turnaround”. I believe we will be more successful when we view our work through this more focused lens. After all, we have many examples scattered around the country of successful schools serving disadvantaged kids and getting great results without formal community support programs—and the

community support these schools do enjoy has typically been built by the schools themselves, on their own terms and timetables, and with their own sense of what needed to be done, not the government's.

Another way to look at this is to reverse the roles. Rather than having communities “push in” to schools, it works better, in my experience, when schools “reach out”. I’ve seen this in many of my clients. Some, for example, are particularly successful with the popular *Love and Logic* program for classroom management and school discipline. This is a simple and effective approach accessible through books, videos, training institutes, and other support that improves implementation and increases scalability. There’s even a “parent” flavor, too.

When it comes to using something like *L&L*, the schools I’ve watched like to get it working in their building first. They start formal parent training programs shortly thereafter. This leads to exactly the type of positive results Mr. Kress refers to. Parents are especially appreciative when they discover a simple discipline model they can use at home that they know is being reinforced at school. Teachers feel the same support in the other direction.

Shared practice between classroom and household quickly and easily becomes true parent-teacher teamwork. Teamwork builds community around issues and results that matter. Government mandates, by contrast, simply build mandates, most of which are grudgingly implemented at best, and therefore unlikely to produce outcomes that are meaningful to anyone.

But formal programs like *Love and Logic* aren’t required for successful school-community interaction. In urban areas where I’ve worked, the schools that seem to have the most active and supportive parent communities are those that simply show parents the good things they are doing for their kids. If you want to know where real community involvement starts, look in a classroom. The most important community member who needs to be involved in his or her local school is the teacher.

Successful school-wide community involvement programs must begin with good relationships and great results between teachers and kids. Without this essential element, rallying community participation is tmerely the making of new clothes for a naked Emperor.

Good school-community relationships, begin with good schooling and often culminate in parent education events held throughout the year where entire families come to school for an evening of information and demonstration. At the best of these events, students tell the story by giving short presentations about their work and why it matters to them. Teachers facilitate an exchange that highlights the best of what the school is doing in terms parents can understand—the simple language and living examples of their own children as proud, successful learners.

While I know of a few schools that have vital relationships with their communities, the number is far too low. Yet I can’t imagine any government mandate changing this. Most schools simply don't want anyone in their communities to be involved because they don't want community members to know what's going on. Rather than requiring community involvement in turnaround schools, the government would do better to require modest forms of what I often think of as “transparency policies”.

I have often called for legislation that would provide “transparency in testing” at the state level, “transparency in teaching” at the building level, and “transparency in governance” at the district level. Simply put, the federal government would require states, schools, and districts to tell the families of their students how they intend to educate their children and measure their progress. Parents can’t really see inside the black box of education. Getting rid of some of that opacity would certainly be possible and obviously beneficial. But I wouldn’t put this in the category of community involvement. It’s more like basic honesty and simple disclosure, something our states, districts, and schools do an intentionally poor job of, and something that not only harms community relations but harms schools themselves when not even the people who work within them can figure out how they work.

Community support can make a big difference in a school. But often, as Mr. Kress notes, it makes little difference at all. And even when it does, it often can’t be sustained unless the school itself—not the community or the government—holds this kind of involvement as a core value and takes bold action consistent with that priority.

Finally, nothing that is of any lasting value can be achieved between school and community without

achievement between teachers and students. We must never put the cart of community involvement before the horse of instructional quality. Good teaching and good learning pull a community together better than any program, government-mandated or otherwise conceived. Communities can push all they want on their local schools—and the federal government can help them push harder—but internal success will trump external pressure every time.



Responded on July 21, 2010 10:47 AM

Parent Empowerment

[Ellen Winn](#)

Director, Education Equality Project

(This entry is co-authored by Ellen Winn of the [Education Equality Project \(EEP\)](#) and Ben Austin, Executive Director of the [Parent Revolution](#), member of the [California State Board of Education](#), and a brand new member of EEP's [Board of Directors](#).)

Parental involvement is no longer the typical site council (i.e., get three parents to sign a grant request) non-involvement. Today, parental involvement is defined by a real transfer of political power to parents – empowerment is a more apt word than involvement. The moral and political imperative is self evident. If we are ever going to upend our country's broken public education system such that student learning is first and foremost, we must both shift the focus in public education from adults to children and empower parents in a meaningful way. Why? Because parents – not administrators, not teachers, not elected or appointed leaders – are the only people who do not have an economic or political conflict of interest. And parents, regardless of race, class, or zip-code, universally want what's best for their children.

Nobody is expecting parents to become education experts or to offer policy prescriptions for our broken education system; that's not what parental empowerment is about. True parental empowerment puts parents at the heart of the reform discussion. The sort of policy changes Secretary Duncan is calling for would finally give parents a clear and authentic way to make their voices heard; an opportunity to demand the dramatic changes so many schools need and, critically, to hold leaders accountable for making these changes.

The Parent Trigger (debated on this [blog](#) a few months back) is a law passed this year in California that demonstrates one strategy for giving parents this type of power. The Parent Trigger grants all parents the right – under state law – to transform their low-performing schools through community organizing. When 51% of parents at a struggling school sign a petition, changes are triggered and mandated immediately. Transformation options must be real and aggressive – e.g., changing school leadership or re-starting the school as a public charter school – and must, most importantly, improve student achievement. The parents are the ones who trigger the school turnaround. This law puts parents in the driver's seat and allows them to select the best option for their children, not just listen in on school improvement conversations. It is a model that federal lawmakers would be wise to adopt.

The Parent Trigger is summarized best by Gwen Samuel, co-founder and chairwoman of the [State of Black CT Alliance](#): “What makes the trigger so important is parents having the legal power, as a last resort, to transform their educational experience from low-performing to high-performing. Parents are not asking to do it alone, but in conjunction with. Parents aren't asking for money or fancy cars, just the legal power to change their child's educational experience to an experience that will produce successful outcomes.”

This type of parental engagement is a burgeoning movement, starting in Los Angeles, spreading throughout California and now to Connecticut. Parents can't wait for endless reports, commissions, hearings, or toothless reforms. One year may seem brief from a policy perspective, but one year could change the trajectory of a child's entire life. For many low-income students and students of color trapped in our nation's worst schools, one year can mean falling, sometimes, irrevocably behind. (Research by the [Hamilton Project](#) at the Brookings Institute shows us that four years in a row with a top-quartile teacher *versus four years in a row with a bottom-quartile teacher* could close the Black-white test score gap.)

We only get one chance to give our kids the education they need and the future they deserve.



Responded on July 21, 2010 9:20 AM

Chuck Saylor's Responds

[Eliza Krigman](#)

NationalJournal.com

Families and Schools Must Be Partners in Education

Charles J. "Chuck" Saylor, national PTA president, submitted the following:

I'm pleased about Secretary Duncan's recent announcement on strengthening the role of parents in turning around our nation's lowest-performing schools. So are our five million members. We cannot solve America's dropout crisis or reverse achievement gaps without powerful, focused partnerships between our families, our schools and the other caring adults in our communities. This can happen if families are provided the tools needed to be treated as equal partners at the education planning table.

We already know about the value of family engagement. Decades of research demonstrate that the level of family engagement is twice as likely to predict a child's academic achievement as their socioeconomic background. As research by University of Chicago researchers led by Anthony Byrk has shown, parental engagement is one of the five critical elements in turning around low-performing schools. The more-engaged parents are in education, the more-successful their children will be in school and in life.

We also know that the value of parental engagement is so great that it can raise student achievement to a level equal to an extra \$1,000 in additional school funding—money difficult to find in this age of tight fiscal resources. Engaging parents also means developing new resources for improving the quality of education for every child: Last year, our PTA members alone generated \$1.5 billion in new resources to help improve student academic achievement.

We even have models of successful family engagement that are easily scalable. Iowa's Sustaining Parent Involvement Network (iSPIN), a program run by the Iowa State Parent Information and Resource Center, helps schools develop policies on family engagement, and trains parents and teachers to work together on improving student achievement. New Visions for Public Schools in New York City has also been successful in building partnerships between families and schools.

But knowing the importance of parental engagement isn't enough. Parents must be treated equally as partners in education decision-making and school reform. We're glad Secretary Duncan understands this. His plan to expand the role of parents in school turnaround decisions, along with his proposal to double the Title I set-aside for parental involvement (which is supported in pending federal legislation) are important steps.

At the same time, the tools for family engagement that are already contained in ESEA/NCLB must also be strengthened. This is why Congress must pass the Family Engagement in Education Act, bipartisan legislation proposed this past May by Representatives Carolyn McCarthy (D-N.Y.) and Todd Russell Platts (R-Pa.). The bill, also known as H.R. 5211, will create federal standards for family-school engagement (which are based on PTA's own National Standards for Family-School Partnerships) and will help break down barriers to family engagement by piloting a new program for local family engagement centers.

Engaged families are as important as high-quality teachers in improving education for all of our children. We need to expand every opportunity for making family engagement a reality so that all parents are true partners in education. Secretary Duncan is taking some important, much-needed steps in this direction.



Responded on July 20, 2010 3:57 PM

Only way to make sure reform endures

[Michael L. Lomax](#)

President and CEO, UNCF

Kudos to Arne Duncan for giving the issue of parental and community involvement the priority and prominence it deserves.

There's been a lot of discussion on this blog and throughout the education policy community on the right components for meaningful reform. But as important as they all are, this may be the most important of all.

The great reforms that have been implemented or are under discussion are, by and large, top-down reforms. And what one administration and Congress can give, the next can take away. Only once in the past sixty years, has an administration of one party passed power to a successor administration of the same party; generally Republican administrations are elected to succeed Democratic administrations, and vice versa.

The only way to ensure continuity and progress in education reform is to build local, state and national constituencies that demand good education for their children.

Especially local. While the Obama administration reforms and the push for national curriculum standards have been the most significant steps in a generation toward making education a matter of national importance, education in America is predominantly local. School districts are local, and the appointed and elected officials who set and implement policy are local as well. So insistence on each child in the community getting a rigorous academic education and graduating from high school prepared to go to college and graduate has to be local as well.

And the most important part of that support must come from low-income communities of color. For one thing, it is their children who are most likely to be attending sub-standard public schools. For another, although they cannot afford to bankroll mayoral and school board candidates as generously as other groups within the community, they have an even more powerful asset, the vote.

The power of the vote is magnified by two demographic circumstances. First, in many cities around the country, better-off families have moved from central cities into suburbs and exurbs, giving the bloc of city-dwelling low-income families of color a larger percentage of possible voters. Second, municipal elections, including those for mayors, city councils and school boards, are often held at different times than elections for governor and federal officials, and typically draw many fewer voters. This gives those who *do* vote even greater influence over the agenda of the campaign and the outcome of the elections.

In addition to using their political power to improve education for all children, parents must also be their own children's most eagle-eyed and forceful advisers and advocates. They need to make sure that their children are assigned to college-track courses rather than to less demanding general math or general science. They need to know what their children are learning, what they're not learning, and when they need help.

Getting parents and the community involved is a big job, one that we all need to do together. UNCF has formed a range of partnerships directed at building a critical mass of grass-roots support for education. For example, I have joined New York public school Chancellor Joel Klein and Janet Murguia, president and CEO of the National Council of La Raza as co-chairs of the Education Equality Project (EEP), a group whose mission is precisely to mobilize low-income communities of color behind lasting school reform.

The education reforms that the Obama administration is setting in motion are great. So are their plans to build parent and community participation into their legislation. But reforms like these will take place and endure only when they are not only proposed from the 30,000-foot level, but demanded at the grass roots.



Responded on July 20, 2010 3:16 PM

Community engagement must be organic

[Chad Wick](#)

CEO, KnowledgeWorks

One way *not* to achieve effective parental and community engagement for school turnarounds is to mandate engagement into public policy.

Community participation in school turnarounds needs to be organic. It must rise up from the grassroots to be successful. To be sure, community and parental involvement have been lacking in too many schools in the United States, and that disengagement is certainly partly to blame for our struggling schools. The reasons are numerous and complex – and not necessarily a result of community disinterest. A decades-long disconnect may lie at the root of the problem.

In his speech last week to the NAACP, Secretary Duncan rightly said turning around a struggling school is “hard, hard work, and there is no simple formula. The work must be shaped at the local level with all of the stakeholders at the table.”

KnowledgeWorks knows this from our high school transformation work in Ohio and other parts of the country. One of the most important aspects of school turnaround work involves authentic community engagement. This provides a structured framework for community members to understand and offer input on school transformation.

At the outset, we saw the community and parents as equal partners in the school transformation process. There were opportunities for people to gather at comfortable locations and at a variety of times convenient for them. It was important to allow the community the time to make informed judgments by attending multiple meetings. When long-standing community disconnects were broken, honest, open dialogue occurred, and people who didn’t ordinarily interact with one another began to build common understanding.

Some of our most remarkable school improvement success stories have occurred in areas with shrinking family incomes and decreases in family education attainment.

Clearly, the best schools in the United States are those where parents and the community are fully engaged with their schools. The most enlightened (and dynamic) communities are those that have finally moved past schooling rooted in old, industrial assumptions.

Moving forward, we owe it to every child in every community to equip them with next-generation skills to compete with their global counterparts – whether they want to fix automobile engines or be brain surgeons. This cannot be accomplished if schools and parents are not acting as partners.

Secretary Duncan is right to ask for more parental and community involvement to help the Department of Education make decisions on improving struggling schools, but that input should happen organically – not via federal mandate.



Responded on July 20, 2010 3:05 PM

A Community Approach

[Marlene Seltzer](#)

President and CEO, Jobs for the Future

Civic involvement—from teachers and parents and from other stakeholders in a community—is essential to turning around schools. The question, of course, is how to structure meaningful involvement, and one answer comes from Philadelphia, where a sustained cross-sector collaborative—Project U-Turn—has

made significant advances in heightening the public's awareness of Philadelphia's dropout crisis and improving options for struggling students and out-of-school youth. Today, other cities look to Philadelphia, where Project U-Turn has coordinated more than 50 organizations to galvanize the Philadelphia community to address the dropout crisis. It has gathered data on the size and scope of the dropout problem, publicized the issue, and undertaken strategic action, including leveraging multiple federal and state funding streams, to increase the options for this population that is concentrated in the nation's lowest performing schools.

Based on its broad membership, focus groups with young people, and other research and data, the Project U-Turn Collaborative framed its initial recommendations as "strategic investments" on the part of all community sectors—the public sector, businesses, parents, educators, and youth. For example, recommended public-sector investments included developing an effective cross-system strategy to support students, building supports for youth offenders returning to their communities, and helping pregnant and parenting teens continue their education. Each investment recommendation was accompanied by specific steps necessary to make significant progress.

The collaboration's efforts are producing results: the number of schools for off-track and out-of-school youth—called Accelerated Schools in Philadelphia—has grown from one to thirteen over five years. At the same time, public and private resources raised or reprogrammed to support reengagement and more effective education for these young people have exceeded \$100 million. In addition, Philadelphia's graduation rate has gradually increased over the last five years, with a small but important portion of that increase directly attributable to the new Accelerated Schools created as a result of Project U-Turn's cross-sector leadership.

Behind these numbers is a sea change in how local leaders and institutions grapple with a collective challenge and how they perceive the youth who leave school. For example, the dropout challenge is now publicly recognized by the mayor, the superintendent, and other key leaders as a crisis with significant municipal impact. Beyond the school system alone, Philadelphia's city agencies are central players in the effort to keep youth on track to graduation.

The terms of the conversation have shifted as well. Today, there is broad recognition that improving graduation rates requires not only prevention and in-school interventions, but also the reengagement and recovery of out-of-school youth, and that these efforts need to be shaped and driven by data. Young people who have left school are considered part of the education pipeline and worthy of reengagement into quality education pathways that advance them to family-sustaining careers.

Philadelphia's community-wide approach to improving graduation rates through a cross-sector collaborative is applicable to improving low-performing schools throughout the nation. Indeed, other cities, including New York and Boston, are following similar paths as they take on President Obama's challenge to ensure that all young people achieve a postsecondary credential.



Responded on July 19, 2010 5:08 PM

Community Engagement Programs That Work

[Delia Pompa](#)

Vice President for Education, National Council of La Raza

It is encouraging to hear Secretary Duncan talk about the need for more community and parental involvement. He is right when he says that turning around low-performing schools is tough work and teachers and administrators need the support from the community to achieve that. However, the administration proposed to eliminate funding for Parent Information and Resource Centers which provide necessary tools for parents and families to understand the education system. Requiring family and community input and providing the right tools and resources for ensuring that critical input is a step in the right direction. One need only to look at how we have implemented such programs at many of NCLR's very own charter schools.

Family engagement and community collaboration is one of eight “Core Qualities” that NCLR charter schools must meet in order to operate in our network. One school that is leading the way in community involvement is the Academia Cesar Chavez (ACC) elementary school in St. Paul, Minn. ACC goes beyond just educating its students with its Padres Comprometidos program. The name translates to “committed parents”. Throughout the school year, ACC holds workshops that support the belief that parents are a child’s first teacher. The workshops focus on an array of topics including health, nutrition, and discipline, peer pressure, preventing bullying and family roles and responsibilities in student attendance. But providing advice works both ways. The program is coupled with its ACC Parent Committee and Board of Directors, both of which include parents on its panels. These parents participate in decision-making about the school’s mission, governance and curriculum.

The federal government’s resources would ensure the capacity needed for states to build similar programs at a local level. If we as educators are truly serious about a plan for attaining community and family collaboration, then we will get behind the Secretary’s call for requiring input from those groups. It can be done successfully if we go about it thoughtfully and strategically.



Responded on July 19, 2010 3:40 PM

Duncan plan not meaningful

[Monty Neill](#)

Deputy Director, FairTest

Secretary Duncan’s proposal for parent involvement will not produce meaningful parental or community engagement and seems primarily designed to help salvage his sinking “Race to the Top” approach to school “turnarounds.”

In particular, his four models for turnarounds – closing a school, turning it over to a private operator (e.g., charters), firing the principal and at least half the staff, or merely firing the principal – appear to be going nowhere in Congress. Some of these components may show up as allowable options, and some of the options do include some useful elements, but the rigid set of four choices is doomed. This seems to be a rare case in Congress where better ideas will prevail, such as those presented by the [Forum on Educational Accountability](#), Representative [Judy Chu](#), and in general terms by House Education Committee Chair [George Miller](#) in his closing remarks at the hearing on turnarounds.

In that case, parental involvement will not be limited to picking from one of four pre-set choices. Parents and community members should participate in evaluating how the school can be significantly improved, designing and then monitoring the improvements. Under NCLB, the school’s Title I parent group is supposed to approve school improvement plans. Congress needs to strengthen these often ignored provisions to provide for effective parent participation. Duncan’s proposals are not even as strong as what NLCB itself now requires.

Duncan may oppose meaningful participation. He worked hard to destroy parent-led [Local School Councils](#) in Chicago that do have meaningful power. When parents and community people vociferously ignored his now-proven-wrong nostrums for change – rooted in closing and privatizing and high-stakes testing as well as eliminating parent authority – he ignored them. In this, he treats parent as he does educators, hearing only the few who agree with him, ignoring the many who oppose his schemes.

It now appears that Congress will go beyond Duncan’s grudging acceptance of very limited parental involvement, but ensuring this will require continued activism from parents and communities across the nation.



Responded on July 19, 2010 10:39 AM

Watch What You Ask For

[Sandy Kress](#)

Former Senior Advisor on Education to President George W. Bush, Akin Gump Strauss Hauer & Feld, LLP

Just asking for more input doesn't move the dial.

Just creating more "parental involvement" doesn't move the dial.

Research does show, however, that when parents set higher expectations for their own children, establish the discipline for more work and effort, and follow through with their children and teachers in the work - this can make a real difference in student and school performance. (Making this happen is a lot easier said than done.)

Also, my experience tells me that parents sometimes can easily be shmoozed by friends and acquaintances in school management in poor performing schools. This is understandable. All parents want to stay on the good side of adults in their children's schools. Plus, it's easy to fall into thinking that more can't be achieved by children in "these schools" in "these communities."

Yet, unless and until the community demands more of the schools and demands what can truly make the difference, the prospects for successful turnaround are not promising.



Responded on July 19, 2010 9:32 AM

"Frog, I Said Stay in that Wheelbarrow!"

[Frederick M. Hess](#)

Director of Education Policy Studies, American Enterprise Institute

Duncan's notion is a fine one. Community and parental involvement are enormously important. And low-performing schools often suffer from a paucity of both. Neither the value of involvement nor the lack of it is new, however. It's not like others haven't tried to previously address this. So, I love Duncan's pledge to have the feds "require" parent and community input. Not only that, but Uncle Sam will require "honest, open discussion" as well. Man, what a great idea. Here are a few other suggestions, while Duncan's on a roll.

Let's require colleges to get input as to how they can be more cost-effective. Let's require the Deepwater Horizon cap not to leak. Let's require airlines to make an honest effort to seek customer input about baggage fees and cabin comfort. And let's require frogs not to jump out of wheelbarrows.

Encouraging schools and districts to reach out parents and communities, providing them tools to do so, and holding them responsible for student outcomes are all helpful ideas. But writing policies to mandate "input-seeking" and "honest discussion?" Talk about a recipe for compliance. I thought the whole theme of reauthorization was going to be moving away from the micro-management and unhelpfully prescriptive interventions of NCLB. But perhaps not.



Responded on July 19, 2010 9:26 AM

When They Talk, Do We Listen?

[Lisa Graham Keegan](#)

Principal, The Keegan Company

While I appreciate the Secretary's continuing attention to the importance of parents, I have to agree with Bill Jackson that this should not have to be a federal requirement. Seeking input from families at your school is the obvious and reflexive behavior of every quality school in the country.

And frankly, where you have to mandate it, no law will be enough to make "parental input" matter.

I get tired of hearing that parents can and should be actively involved enough to improve their schools. Let's just agree that you can't out-parent a very bad math teacher or a school that won't strive to meet goals.

Education is tough, disciplined, professional work that ought to be offered only by those with the heart and the tremendous skill required to do it. If a school will not put that kind of team in place, no amount of parental desire will instill it.

Instead, let's put our energy into lifting the significant barriers to all the emerging choices out there. We should quit pretending that we don't know how to do this, or that we must only operate with currently existing schools. Let those schools who have already proven their immense skills expand or duplicate.

Options matter. Different schools meet the needs of different students. And in this day we have many more options available to us than we allow access to. Check the size of waiting lists for public charter schools and scholarship programs. Those parents are trying to be actively involved...but to no avail so far.

Let the most critical parental involvement be choosing a school that makes sense for their own children in the first place.



Responded on July 19, 2010 8:38 AM

Involve Community & Let Them Lead

[Bill Jackson](#)

Founder and CEO, GreatSchools

Of course community stakeholders should have a say in school turnaround decisions. When I read that we need a Federal law mandating this, I wonder: Do we also need a Federal law mandating that students should tie their sneakers before running around at recess?

In his speech, Secretary Duncan also said: "The fight for education reform will be won school-by-school, and community-by-community. But it will only be won if leaders are demanding it and defending it."

I agree. And, given this, I believe the theory behind this re-authorization of ESEA is that we are *nudging and supporting* local communities to get better at educating their young people.

We wouldn't need ESEA at all if across America we had street demonstrations protesting that local schools were not preparing students well. But we don't. So we need to challenge and support states and districts to aim higher. And then they are going to make the important decisions about how to get from here to there.

Given this theory of change, the first step in this process is community engagement. What exactly do we expect from our schools? What is good enough? Where is our community particularly in need of improvement? What are the most promising strategies or partners we could turn to?

In his speech, Sec. Duncan also said: “Our resources can help pay for better curriculum, incentives for staff, and more learning time. What they cannot buy, however, is courage, and that is what is needed to succeed.”

In America, local communities still make the most important decisions about schools – the ones that have the most influence over the quality of education that children receive. As long as we still believe in “local control,” then we will live and die by the skill and determination of local leaders.

I worry that an unintended consequence of Federal education policy is to move these leaders away from a “leadership” mentality and toward a “compliance” mentality. As ESEA is reauthorized, the Administration and Congress need to think about this: How do we make sure that local leaders act like they (and not the Federal government) are in charge of making sure students get a great education?
