

The Importance of Community Involvement in Schools

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According to the recent [MetLife Survey of the American Teacher](#), teachers, parents and students all agree that parent engagement in schools has increased over the past 25 years. Given the role that family engagement plays in not only academic success, but life success, that is great news. However, the survey also noted that parent engagement remains a challenge for many schools.

Last weekend, at the [Celebration of Teaching and Learning](#), surrounded by educators, representatives from the nonprofit and business worlds, global education experts, academics, and education advocates of all stripes, I found it inspiring how committed the group as a whole was to not just improving family engagement in schools, but expanding engagement beyond the family, to the community in general. Two featured initiatives in particular seemed to embody it: [Reconnecting McDowell](#) and [Cincinnati's Community Learning Centers](#).

Linking Schools and Communities

McDowell County, West Virginia, has ranked last in education in the state for most of the past decade. But it is not just educational challenges that the community faces. The area was once a booming coal community, with over 100,000 residents. Today, there are just 22,000. Many are unemployed (72 percent of students live in a household without gainful employment). McDowell has limited medical services, inadequate access to technology, and substantial drug and alcohol abuse.

Yet those in the community care deeply about it. And everyone agrees that McDowell's children deserve every opportunity for success. So under the leadership of the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) and the West Virginia State Board of Education, a public/private

partnership was born. Reconnecting McDowell is a long-term effort to make educational improvements while addressing all of the community's complex problems.

The project launched in December. So far, the AFT has already begun providing professional development to teachers. The West Virginia state legislature has passed an "innovation zone" bill that allows McDowell County to participate in a teacher-in-residence program with a local university, allowing promising young talent to enter the teaching workforce. The schools have begun comprehensive breakfast and lunch programs; they are hoping to start a dinner program as well. First Book has donated an age-appropriate book for each child in the school system, and Imagination Library is providing books for younger children in the community. The West Virginia AFL-CIO has provided funds to help run water lines to a new housing development.

While the work has just begun, this engagement effort is already showing what can happen when schools and the community commit to working together.

Coordinating Resources in Urban Ohio

In the early 2000s, Cincinnati Public Schools learned that they had the worst school buildings in the nation. They needed to pass a levy to raise money for improvements, but one hadn't passed in a number of years. To garner community support, they proposed that the renovated schools would serve as centers of the community, remaining open on nights and weekends to provide services. The levy passed, and the Community Learning Centers (CLCs) began.

Each CLC is different, based on the needs of the community in which the school is located. Annie Bogenschutz told Celebration attendees about the CLC at her school, Ethel M. Taylor Academy, where 100 percent of students receive free or reduced price lunch. The school is open from 2:15pm to 6pm and offers a hot dinner, tutoring and mentoring, enrichment, parent and family engagement activities, and more. On site, students and families can access mental health and dental services. Next year, Taylor will open a school-based health clinic. These services, and the many others that are offered at the CLC, require no new funds. Instead, the school's partners reallocated their spending.

And they have seen results. Taylor was formerly labeled as one of the worst schools in the state, but is now recognized for its "Continuous Improvement," with increased attendance, standardized test scores, and parent involvement, as well as decreased behavioral incidents.

How Do You Get Started?

The first question asked by the audience after hearing about Cincinnati's CLCs: How do you get started on a family and community engagement initiative?

As Dr. Joyce Epstein (Director of the [Center on School, Family and Community Partnerships](#) at Johns Hopkins University, who spoke at the Celebration in a different session), pointed out, while we all know that home, school and community partnerships are important, and most of us even know what quality home, school and community partnerships look like, we often fall flat in one key area: how to get them.

She suggests those serious about engaging families and communities begin creating an Action Team for Partnerships. That team should include the principal, two-three teachers, two-three family members, and others in the school or community important to the school's work with families (a counselor, social worker, business partner, and so on, depending on the school context). At the high school level, she believes the team must include at least one or two students.

Based on the school improvement plan, that team should choose four goals (two academic goals, one behavioral, and one focused on improving school climate) on which it will focus its efforts. It should then write and implement a one-year action plan, with activities carefully linked to their goals, monitoring outcomes and continually adjusting the plan as needed. (There are many more details on how such teams should work available on the [National Network of Partnership Schools' website](#)).

Bogenschutz offers some additional thoughts as to what is necessary to start the work:

1. **A culture shift.** Those on staff must sincerely recognize the value of the partnership, or it will never succeed.
2. **A third party.** In Cincinnati, each school has a lead partnering agency to assist in connecting with the community. She believes that third party helps ensure the community is comfortable sharing its true hopes and concerns about a school.
3. **Meeting the community where it is.** If you send home a flyer asking the community to come to a meeting at the school, it won't show up. Ask the "neighborhood grandmother" where the meeting should be held -- a church, a restaurant, wherever the community gathers - and go to it.

The bottom line: Family and community engagement is a vital part of a truly successful school. But it rarely just happens -- it must be intentionally designed. When it is present, we should take the time to celebrate it and learn from it.