

SPRING 2006

## Resource Materials on S-F-C Partnerships

**School-Family Partnerships for Children's Success** examines the potential of home-school alliances. The authors encourage schools to build linkages based on families' goals, motivations, and aspirations, and to view cultural and ethnic diversity as opportunities for educators to expand or alter their own world views. Patrikakou, E. N., Weissberg, R. P., Redding, S. & Walberg, H.J. (Eds.). (2005). New York: Teachers College Press.

**Engaging all Families.** In this book, Steven M. Constantino, an award-winning educator, gives a step-by-step process for creating family engagement programs. He also suggests useful strategies and practices for developing effective programs. Constantino, S. M. (2003). Maryland: Scarecrow Education.

**The Harvard Family Research Project** publishes an on-line resource guide for educators that includes a wealth of resources for family involvement, collected from more than 100 national organizations. The 50-page guide is available at: [www.gse.harvard.edu/hfrp/projects/fine/resources/guide/](http://www.gse.harvard.edu/hfrp/projects/fine/resources/guide/)

Available at the SERC Library. The SERC Library, a centralized resource collection for education professionals, families and community members, is open to the public. The SERC Library houses an extensive collection of books, journals, videos and other materials available for loan at no cost on topics related to general education as well as special needs, at-risk and diverse learners. The library, at 25 Industrial Park Rd., Middletown, CT, 06457, is open Monday through Saturday. Further information is available at (860) 632-1485 or on the web at [www.ctserc.org](http://www.ctserc.org).

## Congratulations to 2005 Partnership Award Winners!

The National Network of Partnership Schools at Johns Hopkins University recognized Connecticut for excellence in school-family-community partnerships. (Read more at: <http://www.csos.jhu.edu/p2000/Awards>)

The Connecticut State Department of Education – with CREC, CT Parents Plus and SERC – was recognized for its work with three pilot school districts to help leaders develop infrastructure to support their own schools' Action Teams in creating and sustaining partnership programs linked to school improvement goals. The project, Improving Student Achievement Through School-Family-Community Partnerships, includes Groton, Middletown and Windsor district leaders and their schools.

**Orchard Hills School** in Milford, Connecticut was recognized for involving families and the community in improving student literacy skills. The school Action Team developed partnership programs that involved students, parents and community members to read, write about and share books through special literacy events like book clubs, a summer reading program, and a week-long Readapalooza.

## Welcoming Families: Making Schools “Feel Like Family”

**E**ducators understand more than ever that the key to engaging parents is to make their schools feel “like family.” Schools that extend a genuine welcome to parents have strong partners in the education process, with parents much more likely to be involved at the school level and to help their children at home, too.

### Why Do Families Become Involved?

Studies show that children's success in school can be influenced by their parents' attitudes and beliefs about education. The degree to which parents become involved in their child's education depends on three factors:

- Their **sense of efficacy** – the belief in their own capabilities and whether their involvement will make a difference in their child's success in school.
- Their understanding of **the parent role** – their beliefs about how their children develop and what their responsibility is in that development, especially as it pertains to schooling.
- The **invitation** they receive from the school– whether they have been encouraged by their children and the staff to become involved and shown what they can do to help their children's success in school.

“Specific, well-crafted, and sensitive teacher invitations to involvement appear to meet many parents' expressed wishes for ideas about how they can help their children learn.”  
– Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2005

### Why Is it Important to Be a Welcoming School?

Of the three factors above, school invitingness has been shown to be the most consistent predictor of parent involvement. This is good news because the school climate is something that staff can change. An inviting atmosphere is especially important to making stronger connections with families of children with disabilities, or in communities with diverse culture, language and economic factors. Parents report that feeling welcomed is just as relevant at the secondary level as it is in elementary and middle school.

### What are “Welcoming Schools” Doing Right?

- They make sure “Welcoming” is an active, ongoing process. Parents need frequent invitations, both from the school and from their children.
- They honor the contributions of all families no matter how large or small, from volunteering at the school to helping their children at home.
- They show parents they are respected through frequent “two-way” communication in language parents understand and they address parents' specific needs and concerns.
- They connect family engagement efforts to student learning and help parents understand curriculum expectations and student work.

Could your school be more welcoming to parents and visitors? See the Welcoming Atmosphere Walk-Through on page 2. You might be surprised at how easy it is to implement some simple welcoming techniques.

### References, and for more information:

Hoover-Dempsey, K.V., Walker, J. M. T., Sandler, H. M., Whetsel, D., Green, C. L., Wilkins, S.W., & Closson, K. (2005). Why do parents become involved? Research findings and implications. *The Elementary School Journal*, 106-2, 106-130.  
Mapp, K.L. (2003). *Having their say: Parents describe why and how they are engaged in their children's learning.* *The School Community Journal*, 13, 35-64.

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## How Welcoming is Your School? “The Welcoming Atmosphere Walk-Through”

Developed by the Fairfax, Virginia public schools, the “Welcoming Atmosphere Walk-Through” tool kit can help schools evaluate how welcome they make parents and the community feel. This practical tool looks at such elements as:

### The physical environment.

- Are signs posted near the entrances that welcome parents and visitors, and give clear directions to the main offices?
- Do bulletin boards reflect the school's cultural, racial and linguistic diversity?

### Daily practices of staff.

- Do teachers call parents to report something positive about their children?
- Are alternative communication methods used with parents who speak limited English to help them understand the curriculum and participate in activities?

### School attitudes and actions.

- Do they talk to visitors in friendly, welcoming tones?
- Are written materials friendly, welcoming, respectful?

If your school needs objective feedback on its welcoming atmosphere, gather a team of staff, parents and community members and conduct a walk-through. A few simple changes can make a world of difference in a school's relationship with parents and visitors.

A CREED for educators and other school staff to follow in delivering good customer service to families and the community.

**C Confidentiality:** I can earn the trust of my customers and protect the privacy and confidentiality of information I obtain.

**R Results:** I can return customer calls and e-mails within 48 hours. I can strive to respond to customer questions, issues and concerns in five business days.

**E Equity:** I can display a fair “I Can” attitude. I can acknowledge each customer and assist with questions or concerns.

**E Empathy:** I can listen to my customers and understand their feelings, concerns and needs.

**D Dignity:** I can treat my customers with dignity, patience, courtesy and respect.

*Developed by Brigitte Payne Cogswell, a consultant and mediator in conflict resolution in Hamden.*

*“Good Customer Service” by Success By Design 3-D Seminars, LLC, 1789 Ella T. Grasso Boulevard, New Haven, CT 06511, phone: 203-777-3916.*

*The Welcoming Atmosphere Walk-Through Tool Kit is available from the Institute for Responsive Education at [www.responsiveeducation.org](http://www.responsiveeducation.org). Training in use of the Welcoming Atmosphere Walk-Through Tool Kit is being offered by the CT State Department of Education in collaboration with CREC. Contact Betsy Leborious at 860-509-3615.*

## Encouraging Front Office “Customer Service”

We don't usually think of educators as providing “customer service.” But the term reflects the fact that teachers, principals and staff are actually employed by the parents and citizens of the community. Educators and other school staff who view their jobs in this light understand the importance of making parents and guests feel welcome in their schools. All staff – office personnel, teachers, principals, janitors and cafeteria workers – are all ambassadors for their school.

And who are the “number one” public relations people in every school? Without a doubt, it's the front office staff. Greeting parents and visitors, helping with student registration, answering phones, dealing with students, and responding to emergencies are just a few of the myriad duties these flexible folks must deal with. Hard as it may be, it's important that they are professional, courteous and respectful at all times.

Dr. Sally Wade, director of the Florida Partnership for Family Involvement in Education, reminds us that “Families are the most important visitors on our premises. They are not dependent on us, we are dependent on them. They are not outsiders in our business, they are part of it.” Dr. Wade says that educators who make families and community members feel welcome in schools – and invite them into the educational process – are on their way to developing relationships that support student success.

*For more information: Wade, Sally M. (2005). Opening doors: Building partnerships with families through the front office. Florida Partnership for Family Involvement in Education (brochure) and Opening Doors to Family Friendly Schools (workshop) available at [www.partnershipcenter.usf.edu](http://www.partnershipcenter.usf.edu).*

## Improving Student Achievement through School-Family-Community Partnerships A District-Level Approach

Most involvement takes place when parents interact with the individual schools their children attend. Why, then, is district leadership important in developing welcoming schools?

Studies have found that partnership programs initiated at individual schools, although successful at the outset, often don't have the staying power necessary to keep parents involved. Without commitment and involvement of district leaders and school staff, even promising school-level programs have been known to fall by the wayside.

In 2004, the State Department of Education, SERC, CT Parents Plus and CREC collaborated to develop a district-leadership approach to School-Family-Community Partnerships (SFCP). This pilot program included the schools in Groton, Middletown, and Windsor. Although each district had a different approach to the project, they all found similar positive results.

**GROTON** Two co-coordinators were assigned to work with the existing District Quality Council to establish SFCP Action Teams at each school. The teams comprise the principal, staff, parents and community members. At the high school, students are part of the action team. Within one year, Groton trained action teams in every school in the district. Co-coordinator Susan Morehouse says, “The school improvement plans and school partnership plans are tied together. The partnership is an integral part of the educational strategic plan for the district, and this commitment from the leadership has helped us develop town-wide programs that promote student achievement.” And a variety of creative, interactive programs have helped parents and teachers see they can all work together in new ways to support student achievement.

**MIDDLETOWN** The focus is on changing the definition of “parent involvement” in Middletown. Donna Marino, Parent Resource Coordinator, says, “Just as we have math or writing curriculum, we now have parent involvement curriculum, tying parent participation to school goals and student achievement.” The SFCP District Team is rolling out Action Teams at the individual schools to bridge the communication gap between parents and teachers. Successful programs like Literacy Nights offer families suggestions for helping their children at home, and the resulting growth in reading and writing has led to more schools offering similar events.

**WINDSOR** Windsor is fortunate in that each elementary school has a Family Resource Center (FRC) that provides guidance and resources for parents to help their children learn. The FRCs are proactive in asking parents how the schools can help them be more involved in their children's education. Nanette Serrano, FRC Coordinator, says a major goal this year is to engage hard-to-reach families in literacy awareness activities. “This is part of the Windsor school board's improvement plan, which overlaps with the goals of the district-level SFCP plan. Our objective is to increase family awareness of the importance of literacy, and the link between literacy and achievement in school.”

Although the approaches are different, these district-level projects share the common mission of drawing families and community members into the educational process. Providing leadership and resources at the district level is making a difference in the sustainability and success of partnership programs.



CT School-Family-Community Partnerships, a project of the State

Department of Education, helps educators, parents and community members

develop partnerships by providing training and resources that promote

effective local policies and practices, and increase

public awareness of the positive impact of school-

family-community partnerships on student

learning.

Project Partners: Connecticut State Department

of Education, CREC, CT Parents Plus at

The United Way of Connecticut, & SERC