

Parent Engagement Conversation Summary

Anne Henderson, renowned researcher on Parent Engagement in our schools and author of *Beyond the Bake Sale*, met with parents, PTO officers, teachers, administrators and school board trustees over the course of three days in October, 2008. Co-sponsored by RBBCSC, MCCSCS and the Community Alliance to Promote Education (CAPE), the goal of these meetings was to further the collective perspective of what purposeful parent engagement might become in schools throughout Monroe County. Interesting discussions were generally driven by Anne's review of the research on parent engagement and questions such as "What do you know about family engagement?" and "What will it take to make our schools more family friendly?"

Overview of Interest Group Discussions:

Following is a brief overview of each group's discussions and potential outcomes. Each forum demonstrated commitment to building on current practices to enrich the opportunities for families to be included in their children's education and in the life of the school. Each group was able to review the notes from the previous groups.

Parent Forum held at South High School included approximately thirty-five parents. Parents of students across grade levels talked in small groups about situations when teachers and administrators had reached out to provide support and/or to offer a warm welcome. Those personal stories depicted caring school communities. Parents across the schools were passionate about improved communication and about invitations to be part of the life of the school. They are interested in having greeters in the schools, a liaison for parents, and parent mentors to help families settle into the new school. In general, parents felt the opportunities at the elementary level were greater than those at the secondary level across schools and districts.

PTO officers came together for a two hour discussion on Family Friendly Schools. They shared the strengths of their respective school's current policies and the potential to increase the welcoming atmosphere. They identified ways to increase the friendliness of the school that included support for transitions between grade levels (especially to the secondary levels), transparency of what happens in the schools and welcoming front office staff. In general, PTO officers identified a need for district wide policies and commitments to enhance family friendly schools

Principals also listened to the research with interest and identified a variety of ways to better engage families with recommendations on what would be needed to accomplish the goals. In general, principals identified supports needed to better engage parents in their children's

education. These supports included a strong welcoming environment including a greeter, schools returning calls from families in a timely manner, and having a parent liaison in the schools.

Elementary teachers met with Anne within their own school corporations.

- MCCSC teachers discussed holding PTO meetings in convenient locations, hosting welcoming meetings at the beginning of the year, and communication.

Secondary teachers met with Anne within their own school corporations.

- MCCSC secondary teachers identified making the entrances/buildings more welcoming, revisiting the open house format noted to be overcrowded and rushed, enhancing other communication opportunities, and opening the building for family friendly social events. Parents would like to return to semester rather than trimester system.

District leaders

District administrators and School Board Trustees met with Anne to review the research and the recommendations reviewed to date. They listened with interest, asking clarifying questions, and indicated significant interest in building the capacity to better engage parents in their children's education. Board members confirmed their desire to support additional training for parents and educators to further understanding and build a sustainable framework.

Common Themes and Recommendations:

Several common themes emerged across groups, which form the bold headings below. Within each category, specific recommendations are bulleted within the category.

1. Communication

- Create welcoming atmosphere by having signage and greeters at each school
- Updated, user-friendly and consistent use of technology to communicate in a timely manner
 - Staff biographies and pictures on websites
 - Place PTO and other parent organizations' information on school websites
 - Return phone calls, emails as soon as possible
 - District wide calendars for events across schools
 - Classroom/teacher newsletters on websites describing what is being taught
 - District wide announcements format including volunteer opportunities
 - Replace automated telephone systems with real people

- Use multiple formats to get to know and to inform parents
 - Hold *Getting to Know* you events
 - Home visits
 - Personalize communication
 - Communicate rationale for policies (i.e. doors being locked)
 - Greeters (or signage) at schools to welcome and direct parents

2. Expectations and Understandings

- Identify and articulate specific ways for parents/families to become involved (especially at the secondary levels) to answer the question “What does it take to be involved?”
 - Provide meaningful opportunities for parents to volunteer and be involved in ways that respect their strengths and interest
 - Sharing artifacts, books, information sources
 - Use specialized skills to support student understanding
- Make what happens in the classroom more transparent/obvious to parents
 - Events focused on specific subject areas to inform parents of what students are learning
 - Assignments posted on websites prior to due dates
 - Interactive homework

3. Improve Current Programs

- Revise open houses - especially at secondary levels
- Hold an open house or parent conferences each semester
- Find opportunities to display student work across content areas and provide ways for families to review and celebrate the work
- Include Parent Orientation activities with Freshman Kickoff activities
- PTO meetings held at community centers (increase access for parents) and on different days of the week to better address the schedules of families
- Hold classes/information nights for parents on issues important to them
- Social workers have time to focus on families and students (versus truancy/attendance)

4. Staffing and Resources

- Prioritize Title I funds and other resources to reflect the goal of having parent liaison/family engagement coordinators available to each Title I school. Provide training

and a clear job description, in collaboration with principals so they can use this position effectively.

- Build on success of this program to invest in a parent liaison/family engagement coordinator position for all schools to access.
- Family Resource Centers at all Title I schools, and family centers (room/space in school stocked with info and materials for families, place for them to meet)
- Continued training for parents and teachers

5. District Commitment and Resources

- District level leadership inspires support of high expectations for meaningful parent engagement to educators and to parents.
- District level leadership and support of measurable goals, objectives and outcomes for meaningful parent engagement in the schools.
- Provide professional development for school staff (conflict resolution, customer service training, home visits, class/cultural/ethnic differences, supporting families in need)
- Develop district-wide communication policies (e.g. school Web site content and quality; expectations of schools)
- Coordinate effort with Teacher's Associations to enhance parent engagement in the schools.
- Advocate for early childhood programs for parents and young children