



Equity Now!

School-Family Partnerships: Creating Democratic and Responsive Schools



October 2012



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Meet the Authors:

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IMPACT: Educate, Engage, Empower--For Equity

"No school can work well for children if parents and teachers do not act in partnership on behalf of the children's best interests."

-Dorothy H. Cohen

Educate

"Students learn more and succeed at higher levels when home, school, and community work together to support students' learning and development"

(Epstein, 2006, p. 87).

Education is the shared responsibility of families, communities, and school staff. Strong school-family partnerships, then, are an essential part of the life of schools, with "educators, families, and community members work[ing] together to share information, guide students, solve problems, and celebrate successes" (Epstein, 2001, p. 4). Unfortunately, this is not always the case, particularly in school contexts with historically underserved student populations because families are often seen as adversaries to the educational process (Bryan, 2005). However, we know that when schools establish positive relationships based on mutual respect, they can improve school climate, increase parental leadership abilities, and promote student success in school and life (Henderson & Mapp, 2002). How, then, is this accomplished? In order to create democratic and responsive school communities, educators must initiate positive communication with families, learn about families' lived experiences, and apply this knowledge in the classroom.

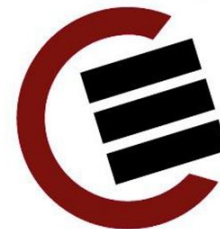
The Goal: Creating Democratic and Responsive School Communities

Schools should be *democratic* and *responsive*. A first step to reshaping school and family partnerships, then, is to collaboratively establish new "roles, responsibilities, and relationships among families and schools" (Semke & Sheridan, 2012, p. 41). Families should play a pivotal role in making both systems-level decisions (e.g., curriculum selection and design, teacher selection procedures, and school policymaking) and decisions about their individual students. When schools afford parents and family members the opportunity to play an active role in decision making, relationships built upon respect are formed and student achievement rates increase (Muscott, Szczesiul, Berk, Staub, Hoover, & Perry-Chisholm, 2008).

Strategy One: Fostering Positive Communication

In an effort to further democratic partnerships, school staff must foster bi-directional communication with families. Student and family input should be sought out, valued, and used to make critical decisions about school functions. Open and multi-lingual lines of communication should be created with families, allowing all families to develop a vested interest in school operations. Through technology, educators and families can engage with one other in multiple ways, including text messages, videos, photographs, and online journals. In all forms of

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communication, educators should strive to be "...respectful (i.e., honor[ing] diverse identities), reciprocal (i.e., honor[ing] diverse voices), and responsive (i.e., honor[ing] connections across differences)" (Barrera & Kramer, 2007, p. 304).

Strategy Two: Learning about Families' Lived Experiences

Have you visited your students' homes? Educators can frequent the homes and community spaces of their students to learn more about the rich cultural identities of students and their families by interacting with them across multiple settings (Moll, Amanti, Neff, & Gonzalez, 1992). School staff can also periodically engage in neighborhood walks in which they go from residence to residence to speak with parents and build positive relationships (McKenzie & Scheurich, 2004). Engaging with the community at large is significantly important as well; community members can serve as valuable sources of support and information for teachers, students, and families. All members of the school community can and will benefit from attending and participating in authentic multicultural learning activities on a regular basis held in the school and in the community at large (The Education Alliance, 2006). These types of events will serve as a common meeting ground for all parties to learn about one another.

Strategy Three: Applying Learned Knowledge to the School Setting

Upon acquiring knowledge about individual families and the community at large, educators can draw on families' "funds of knowledge," or "the historically accumulated and culturally developed bodies of knowledge and skills essential for household or individual functioning and well-being" (Gonzalez, Moll, & Amanti, 2005, p. 133) in planning instruction. In addition, parents can become academic resources for students within the classroom. The knowledge of families will contribute substantially to the knowledge base of students. Expertise of community members should be sought out as well, as there are individuals within all communities who are eager to serve as academic resources for students and to share valuable resources that will shape the future for children (Epstein, 2001).

Strategies to improve family-school relations to foster more equitable learning experiences are abundant. To create democratic and responsive school

JACQUELINE GARVEY has been involved as a partner in education for over 25 years. Her passion for equity in education is the driving force behind her work in supporting family, school, and community partnerships. Through leadership roles in professional and volunteer positions, she has helped young people maximize their potential, empowered parents to become advocates for equitable education, and provided technical assistance and training to educators.

Currently, Ms. Garvey is the executive director of the Indiana Partnerships Center, a statewide organization whose underlying mission is to partner with schools to engage, equip, and empower all families to be involved in their children's education. Under her leadership, the Indiana Partnerships Center has transitioned from a program under a parent agency to an independent, not-for-profit organization. Additionally, Jackie was instrumental in the creation of the Indiana Academy for Parent & School Leadership, a key statewide initiative in which educators and parents develop strategies for linking parent activities to student learning and school improvement.

Notably, there is a plethora of other Indiana Partnerships Center initiatives led and/or designed under Jackie's leadership that address equity issues such as *Voices in Action*, *Family Friendly Walk Through*, college visits for families of first generation students, and technical assistance to Title I schools. Her work to engage, equip, and empower families to understand their rights and responsibilities under federal and state education laws is a vital part of creating democratic and responsive schools.

Save the Date!

communities, schools must **foster positive lines of communication between families and educators, learn about families' lived experiences, and apply that knowledge in the classroom.** This dynamic system of interactions among schools, families, and communities will ultimately benefit students.

Have a question or comment about this article? [Share it here!](#)

Engage



In September, Great Lakes Equity Center staff member Jada Phelps attended an advisory council meeting at nearby George Washington Community High School (GWCHS). George Washington Community High School's impressive impact on the local community has made it stand out as a national model for community schools. GWCHS has also been recognized by the Knowledge Works Foundation of Cincinnati, Ohio as "one of the nation's best examples of a school as center of community." Moreover, in 2006, GWCHS received the National Community School Award from the Washington, D.C.-based organization, Coalition for Community Schools.

Nearly 40 community members along with school leaders, faculty and staff, eagerly filled the Fugate Community Room at [George Washington Community High School \(GWCHS\)](#), in Indianapolis, Indiana for their monthly community advisory council meeting. Impressively, the group included alumni, soon-to-be graduates, parents,

The Great Lakes Equity Center will be hosting its first [Equity Leaders Institute!](#)

WHEN: February 20-21, 2013

WHERE: Indianapolis, IN

TOPIC: Advancing Educational Equity

FOCUS: Participants will learn to apply key equity tools and strategies for addressing multifaceted issues related to teaching and learning of diverse students.

Upcoming Events

Indiana

October 17-21

[Council of the Great City Schools](#)
56th Annual Fall Conference
Indianapolis, IN

Minnesota

October 1-31

[National Bullying Prevention Month](#)
Bloomington, MN

Illinois

October 31-November 3

[American Association of School Personnel Administrators](#)
74th Annual Conference
Chicago, IL

Wisconsin

October 19

[School Law Seminar](#)
Wisconsin Association of School Boards
Madison, WI

residents, community organizers, non-profit representatives, community center liaisons, health practitioners, curriculum specialists, higher education researchers, evaluators, and neighborhood partners from [Indiana University - Purdue University Indianapolis](#). These individuals came together to discuss how to equitably serve all George Washington Community High School students and their families. Even the meeting place for the advisory council was remarkably symbolic, as it had been named after one of the [Near Westside Community](#) members, Daniel Fugate, who had been a dedicated community and public school advocate before his passing.

Leading the council meeting was the new school principal, Teresa Ezell, and long-term partner of the George Washington Continentals, Jim Grimm, Director of School/Community Engagement. Ms. Ezell, although new to the George Washington family, seemed to be right in step with continuing the legacy GWCHS has established since its rebirth as a community high school in 2006 in the historical neighborhood of Haughville. Ms. Ezell and Mr. Grimm intentionally focused on the well-being of students, families, the Haughville neighborhood, and the community at large and connected these issues with the services these dedicated partners could provide. It was evident from the dialogue that a relationship between the community and the school had already been forged outside the Fugate Community Room.

Without question, the relationship established between GWCHS and the Haughville community is an investment and the return will be a great community that is and will be equitably served. GWCHS, also known as "[The Hub](#)" to the Westside residents who participate in the activities and services it offers, is a model of a learning community. This full service community school currently has over 60 partners that offer need-based services onsite that are aligned with the school's improvement goals. Services and partners are not arbitrarily chosen; rather, they are strategically selected through student, parental, and community input. The high quality of these partnerships has contributed to the growth that the school has shown since its inception as a community school. Some benchmarks of success have been:

- In 2010, an Indiana University study found that GWCHS minority students - and Hispanic males in particular - were the highest achieving students in the school.
- In 2011, 77% of George Washington students graduated within four years, which was a 30 point increase from 47% in 2009.
- In 2012, 2011, and 2009, 100% of graduates were accepted to post-secondary education programs, up from 80% in 2006.

The pursuit of equity is one of the main motivations for George Washington's community outreach. Its innovative partnerships - grounded in the idea of equity as well as its commitment to the people that the school serves - offer a new way to think about the functions of schools and how schools engage with the community at large.

The Great Lakes Equity Center would like to extend a special thanks to Jim Grimm, Director of School/Community Engagement at GWCHS, and Dr. Monica Medina, Clinical Lecturer at Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis, for their dedication to George Washington Community High School.

Have a question or comment about this article? [Share it here!](#)

Michigan

November 8-11

Michigan Association of School Boards
Fall Conference and Exhibit Show
[Leading Innovation in Education through Best Practices, Technology and Communications](#)
Detroit, MI

Ohio

November 11-14

Ohio School Board Association
[2012 Capital Conference](#)
Columbus, Ohio

Questions? Comments?



Idea for a future newsletter topic?

Let us know!!

Something to Watch!



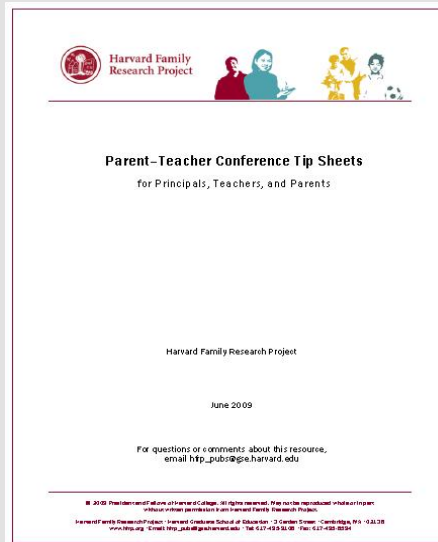
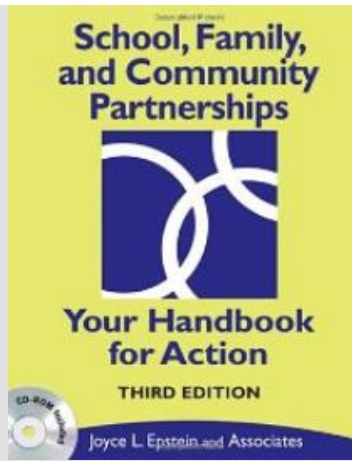
This [video](#) showcases how one school strengthened school-family partnerships. Beacon Hill Elementary is located in Seattle, WA and serves a diverse student body. To facilitate strong relationships between the school and immigrant and refugee families, the school hosts a Latino parent group that provides translation services and invites parents to participate in the teaching and learning activities of the school.

Something to Read!

This book by Joyce Epstein and Associates is an authoritative guide on how to engage in school-community partnerships. [School, Family, and Community Partnerships: Your Handbook for Action \(3rd Edition\)](#) communicates a proven framework on how to mobilize community resources and evaluate school-community partnerships. The text addresses teachers and administrators, sharing strategies for working with parents and involving the community to increase student success. It also speaks to parents and students, articulating ideas for helping

children do their best. This edition comes with a CD-ROM that contains essential tools that can be adapted for different school scenarios.

Something to Use!



Parent-teacher conferences are an important component of ongoing home-school communication and family involvement in children's education. Our [Virtual Equity Library](#) contains [three tip sheets](#) that are designed for use by principals, teachers, and parents. The tip sheets are designed to help ensure that conferences achieve their maximum potential. Intended to be used as a set, they combine complementary information with targeted suggestions so that parents and educators enter conferences with shared expectations and an increased ability to work together to improve children's educational outcomes.

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