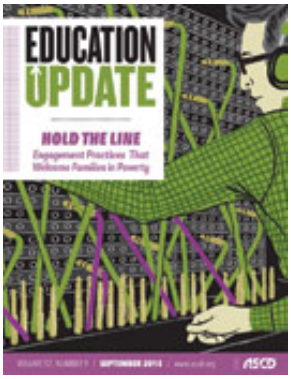
EDUCATION UPDATE



Buy this issue

September 2015 | Volume **57** | Number **9**
Hold the Line: Engagement Practices That Welcome Families in Poverty

Hold the Line: Engagement Practices That Welcome Families in Poverty

Laura Varlas

Dialing up some creative engagement ideas positions schools for better partnerships with low-income families.

Many mornings, a 9th grader in Philadelphia gets dressed, leaves her house, and never arrives at school. Her home phone is more likely to be answered by a disconnect message than by her parent. So, as is the case with many families in poverty, it would seem engagement efforts meet economic realities in a dead end.

"For a lot of these families, you can't pick up the phone and expect that the number you called two weeks ago is still a working number. But you can't use that as an excuse not to engage," explains Allison Rodman, an assistant principal in northeast Philadelphia. In fact, this truant teen's dad is very involved in his daughter's education; he just needs educators to be willing to pursue creative strategies for contacting him. He and Rodman have worked out a system where, if she needs to get in touch with him, she calls a neighbor who takes the phone to him.

Attitudinal Hang-Ups

Families in poverty experience barriers to school engagement that often manifest in logistical ways, like the disconnected phone. They may work evening shifts at hourly wage jobs where taking time off for school meetings, or getting child care and transportation that allow them to attend those meetings, is prohibitive. The tendency, says author and community activist Paul Gorski, is for the school to misinterpret the symptoms of these barriers. In other words, they assume that if parents don't show up, they must not care.

Addressing this prejudice requires a major shift in thinking—from "how do we fix *families* in poverty to how do we fix the *conditions* that make engagement less accessible to families in poverty?" says Gorski. The problem is not that these families don't care; it's that they have less access to paid leave, transportation, and child care, and they are more likely to experience the school as a hostile environment because of discrimination they faced as students.

"A lot of schools think that if we just do these five strategies, everything will be OK," Gorski relates. That's premature if educators don't first address implicit beliefs about low-income parents. "Teachers know what it's like to be the target of a deficit view that says there's something wrong with you, and that's why kids aren't doing well in school," Gorski observes. He uses this as a common starting point to persuade teachers not to pass that deficit view down to students or their families.

Harvard Family Research Project (HFRP) offers a tool for constructively confronting biases: a set of teaching cases that present dilemmas in school-to-family relations, especially among low-income and culturally diverse families. These case studies provide a neutral space for educators to think about their role in parent outreach, how bias affects situations, and what they could do to improve school-to-home connections, says Margaret Caspe, HFRP senior research analyst.

"All families want their child to succeed," adds M. Elena Lopez, HFRP associate director. We have to confront the ways our system privileges the middle and upper classes and challenge our beliefs about families in poverty, she notes.

Where They Are

Gorski says research dating back to the mid-70s shows there's no difference in how parents of different income levels value education: "Low-income parents have the exact same ideals as wealthier families." Although jobs and child care responsibilities might prevent them from sitting with their children as they do homework, they still recognize the value of completing homework and encourage their children to do so, he asserts.

Rodman agrees that parent engagement can be very strong; it just might happen in different ways. "As teachers and school leaders, we have a responsibility to shake out the notion of what traditional parent engagement looks like. We need to be creative and persistent." For example, Rodman's school struggled with low attendance at back-to-school nights and other on-site events. So they surveyed families about what they like to do in their free time and discovered that families enjoyed making and sharing food with one another. Now, the school lets parents take the lead on providing food at events, which has resulted in greater parent turnout. Rodman suggests we reflect on whether we are designing engagement around the way *we* experienced school or considering what our community truly values.

Flexible timing, on-hand translators, and parent leadership can make school events more accessible. But Rodman and others also employ responsive practices that meet parents where they are—in their homes or even a public library. "Schools must prioritize offering support to parents and their families at home, including home visits, providing support to have computers and Internet access, and providing books for pleasure reading," insists parent engagement author Larry Ferlazzo.

Maine's Comienza en Casa (It Starts at Home) program is an example of one such effort. In partnership with area kindergarten teachers, this program provides iPads, loaded with educational games and materials, for migrant families to support their young children as they transition to school.

Community Strengths

Outreach from schools to families in poverty often extends across race and class borders. In urban schools, especially, there tends to be a mismatch between predominately white middle-class educators and the low-income communities of color they serve. It is "our responsibility to connect with community organizations that are going to keep us in touch with what our community values and what important events are happening," Rodman explains of her school, where the staff is mostly white and the students are black and Latino.

For instance, "a lot of our families love to participate in the Puerto Rican Day parade," says Rodman. So her school has intentionally partnered with several Latino groups tied to the event, bringing the school and community together. These Latino organizations now use the school as a site for after-school tutoring and other activities.

Social workers, parents as board members, and family liaisons also help schools forge authentic connections to families in poverty. "You want to be someone they can trust enough to see the school as a point of contact with the community," says Carmelita Naves, a community schools coordinator in Washington, D.C. "The school can't provide housing, but we can connect them with the right organizations that can make that process easier." Naves works directly with the Mary Center, a social service agency that provides a range of supports, such as housing, job skills, food, and health care.

Family liaisons like Naves make the school a welcoming, trustworthy environment for low-income families. Without relational trust, research shows schools have a one in seven chance of making significant improvements in school achievement (read "Trust in Schools: A Core Resource for School Reform" in *Educational Leadership*).

A 2014 evaluative study of the family liaison role in a high-poverty, urban district illuminates ways that schools might make this lever for family engagement even more effective. Researchers Beverly Dretzke and Susan Rickers report that liaisons wanted the flexibility to connect with families outside of school contract hours, limited nonessential duties (i.e., lunch duty) to maximize time for one-on-one engagement, and opportunities to professionalize their job.

"Many people are hired as family liaisons because of their community connections and networking skills," says Rickers, who teaches at Bemidji State University. "We found they were also really interested in professional development to help them develop best practices in the work they were doing."

Systemic, Not Random

Schools that make positive links to families in poverty see responsive, ongoing engagement as part of their DNA. They're willing to keep asking the tough questions, says poverty expert Bill Parrett. They build systems, not just what Caspe and Lopez call a "random acts" style of engagement.

Creighton School District, a small urban community in Arizona with approximately 7,200 students, of whom 85 percent are Hispanic and 90 percent qualify for free and reduced-price lunch, made such a commitment. The district initially practiced a "random acts" approach, with school events here and there and little parent engagement as a result. So

school administrator Maria Paredes surveyed families in the district to see which events they valued, and she found that academically focused events rose to the fore. Based on this community feedback, she offered parents the option to streamline their on-site engagement into quarterly conferences focused on student data. In these meetings, parents and teachers discuss student achievement, set goals, and identify ways to track and support those goals. With more focused, purposeful reasons to meet, parent engagement increased in the district.

Across the United States, systemic approaches to family engagement are taking hold. In some states—Nevada and Massachusetts, for example—family engagement is part of the accountability metric for school leaders. They are held accountable for their outreach efforts and are provided rubrics to shape and grow these efforts. Likewise, the Flamboyan Foundation, an educational nonprofit in both Washington, D.C., and Puerto Rico, created a rubric for classroom teachers to self-assess their family engagement skills. It's divided into three sections that address mindset, trust, and collaboration on academic goals. Caspe and Lopez also highlight California for recently releasing a framework for parent engagement that links state and Title I requirements. And many are familiar with Joyce Epstein's well-established framework for six types of parental involvement in schools, which encompasses challenges and accommodations for a variety of community needs.

"If you're a teacher asking parents to come into your classroom, what conversely can you do to go out into the community?"

Creative and Persistent

Frameworks and rubrics shouldn't diminish the personal agency and creativity that educators bring to this work. Author Kathleen Budge relates that one school simply held itself accountable for communicating something positive to parents at least once a week. They tracked this data with the principal and school board and found that parents were more receptive and communicative as a result.

Caspe says teachers can continually reflect on what outreach looks like in their classrooms by thinking about how they share data with families. Simply establishing several points of communication—print or e-mail newsletters, phone calls, and tweets or text messages—can shore up home connections. "And if you're a teacher asking parents to come into your classroom, what conversely can you do to go out into the community?" she asks.

Families in poverty show up for their kids in all sorts of ways—it just might not be at an after-school event. These families need educators who are committed to challenging biases toward people in poverty and who are creative and persistent in their strategies for removing economic barriers to school engagement. Educators must continually ask themselves whose reality they are basing their engagement strategies on and remind themselves that, even if the first call doesn't go through, there's always someone on the other end of the line who cares. EU

Related Resources

Find the research, recommended frameworks, role-playing activities, and self-evaluation tools to make your school more accessible to families in poverty. Visit www.ascd.org/eu0915poverty for links to the resources mentioned in this article.

Laura Varlas is the managing editor of ASCD Express.

KEYWORDS

Click on keywords to see similar products:
Family and community involvement, Poverty, Whole Child

Copyright © 2015 by ASCD

Requesting Permission

- For **photocopy**, **electronic and online access**, and **republication requests**, go to the Copyright Clearance Center. Enter the periodical title within the "**Get Permission**" search field.
- To **translate** this article, contact permissions@ascd.org