

Schools seek greater parent role in student learning

*Outreach starts at schools,
but goals and resources
require board leadership*

Del Stover

School board members who bemoan the lack of parental involvement in their children's education should take a closer look at what's happening in the Miami-Dade County Public Schools. Over the past three years, more than 85,000 parents and families have participated in classes and family learning events sponsored by the school system's nationally recognized Parent Academy.

Meanwhile, a cadre of parent liaisons and school action teams have been working successfully in schools across Fort Worth, Texas, to encourage parents—particularly poorer and non-English-speaking parents—to participate in school activities and their children's learning.

Such initiatives, two among many nationwide, are a clear indication of the importance that urban school policymakers and administrators are placing these days on parental outreach programs.

"Parent involvement and engagement is definitely worth making a priority," says



Students line up with their bicycles at a PTA event in Fort Worth, Texas. Urban schools nationwide are seeking new approaches to get parents more involved in their children's education.

See Parents on page 8

INSIDE

3

Youth gangs more sophisticated than urban leaders believe

7

Metro area capital improvement plan funds Oklahoma City schools

11

Want smaller class sizes? Focus first on low achievers

Urban Advocate, the official publication of NSBA's Council of Urban Boards of Education (CUBE), is published five times a year. Copyright 2008.

2008-09 CUBE Steering Committee

CUBE Chair

Steve Corona, Fort Wayne, Ind.

CUBE Vice Chair

Lock P. Beachum Sr., Youngstown, Ohio

Rashidah Abdulhaqq, Cleveland, Ohio

Tariq Butt, Chicago, Ill.

Elizabeth Daniels, Portsmouth, Va.

Minnie Forte-Brown, Durham, N.C.

Sandra Jensen, Omaha, Neb.

Vilma Leake, Charlotte, N.C.

Ana Rivas Logan, Miami, Fla.

Christene C. Moss, Fort Worth, Texas

Brian Perkins, New Haven, Conn.

Evelyn Shapiro, Phoenix, Ariz.

Sandra Smith-Jones, Virginia Beach, Va.

Susan Valdes, Tampa, Fla.

About CUBE

NSBA's Council of Urban Boards of Education (CUBE), the urban initiative of NSBA's National Affiliate program, addresses the programmatic, fiscal, and governance challenges of urban public education on behalf of its 116 member school boards and the more than 8 million students they serve. Through legislative advocacy, conferences, workshops, seminars, and publications, CUBE has been in the forefront of cultivating excellence in urban public schools for four decades.

About NSBA

The National School Boards Association is the nationwide advocacy organization for public school governance. NSBA's mission is to foster excellence and equity in public elementary and secondary education in the United States through local school board leadership. Founded in 1940, NSBA is a not-for-profit federation of state associations of school boards across the United States and the school boards of Hawaii, and the U.S. Virgin Islands.

NSBA President and Liaison to CUBE
Barbara Bolas

Executive Director **Anne L. Bryant**

Deputy Executive Director **Joseph S. Villani**

Associate Executive Director, Constituent Services
Don E. Blom

Director, CUBE **Katrina A. Kelley**

Senior Manager, CUBE **Jessica Bonaiuto**

Manager of Membership Services, CUBE **Kevin Scott**

Coordinator, CUBE **Krista Freer**

Editor, Urban Advocate **Del Stover**

Director of Publications **Glenn Cook**

Production Manager **Carrie E. Carroll**

Production Assistant **Donna J. Ernst**

Urban Advocate is printed and assembled by the
NSBA Office Services Print Shop

CUBE News

Meet your CUBE Steering Committee

Steve Corona of Fort Wayne, Ind., was re-elected chair of the CUBE Steering Committee during the CUBE Annual Business Meeting March 28 in Orlando, Fla. Lock P. Beachum Sr. was re-elected vice chair.

Four new members also joined the Steering Committee: Minnie Forte-Brown, Durham, N.C.; Sandra Jensen, Omaha, Neb.; Sandra Smith-Jones, Virginia Beach, Va.; and Susan Valdes, Tampa, Fla.

Two incumbent members, Tariq Butt of

Chicago and Rashidah Abdulhaqq of Cleveland, were re-elected. Other committee members still completing their three-year terms of office include Elizabeth Daniels, Portsmouth, Va.; Vilma Leake, Charlotte, N.C.; Christene Moss, Fort Worth, Texas; Evelyn Shapiro, Phoenix, Ariz.; and Ana Rivas Logan, Miami, Fla.

Brian Perkins of New Haven, Conn., serves as immediate past chair.

Retiring from the Steering Committee was Jill Wynns of San Francisco.

CUBE Resolutions

The NSBA Delegate Assembly at this year's Annual Conference approved several proposals from CUBE for inclusion in NSBA's 2008 Resolutions and Policies and Beliefs, which form the basis of policy followed in the next year by the NSBA Board of Directors.

CUBE proposed two resolutions:

- NSBA urges candidates seeking state and federal offices to make education a priority and to reduce the number of unfunded mandates on local schools.

- NSBA urges all education professionals and decision makers at all levels of government to continue their efforts to promote diversity in public schools and renew their commitment to equity and excellence for all students.

CUBE also proposed amendments and one new entry to NSBA's Beliefs and Policies:

- Public schools should provide equitable access and ensure that all students have the knowledge and skills to succeed as contributing members in a rapidly changing, global society, regardless of factors such as race, gender, sexual orientation, ethnic background, English proficiency, immigrant status, socioeconomic status, or disability.

- NSBA urges school boards to develop alternative education programs for dangerous and disruptive students or youth in the juvenile justice system, if within the local school board purview, and to seek broad financial support for such programs.

- School board members, as community leaders, should demonstrate culturally competent skills and encourage productive dialogue about race in their communities, model and encourage inclusive thinking and behavior, and provide credible and balanced information on issues of race ultimately creating positive change.

Site Visits

Urban school leaders got a first-hand look at the exciting programs in three Orange County schools during site visits sponsored by CUBE during the NSBA Annual Conference in Orlando, Fla.

After a breakfast briefing by Orange County Public Schools officials, participants chose one of three rapidly improving schools to visit. One school on the list was Oak Ridge High School, identified by *Newsweek* as being among the top 5 per-

cent of high schools in the nation.

Also visited was Jones High School, which saw improved scores in reading, math, and science on Florida's Comprehensive Assessment Test (FCAT) from 2006 to 2007.

The third school visited was Stonewall Jackson Middle School, recently named one of Florida's two National Demonstration AVID (Advancement Via Individual Determination) schools.

Orange County Superintendent Ronald Blocker told school leaders that the district now aspires to be "the top producer of successful students in the nation."

As youth gangs evolve, urban schools must respond, too

Youth gangs are more commonplace and sophisticated than school officials realize, and elements of our society—from Hollywood to rap singers—are depicting gangs with a glamour and acceptance that inadvertently serves as a recruiting tool.

These were some of the disturbing messages shared with urban school leaders during a session on gang prevention and intervention sponsored by CUBE during the NSBA Annual Conference in Orlando, Fla.

Today, there are more than 30,000 gangs nationwide, with a membership of at least 800,000, said Marc Wilder, a detective with the gang unit of the Sheriff's Office of Hillsborough County, Fla. "Every day, the numbers are growing," he added.

Gangs vary in size and influence by community, but law enforcement agencies are seeing a disturbing sophistication in their operations, said Khaldun Everage, regional security facilitator for the Chicago Public Schools. School board members can go online and find official gang websites, which read like a how-to guide with bylaws and advice for dealing with police.

Some gangs even hold weekly training

sessions and force members to memorize state statutes to cite when stopped by police, he added. Some install video cameras on their cars to record their interaction with police. Others require gang members to wear a common "uniform"—such as white t-shirts and baseball hats—so that if one member is spotted selling drugs, he can blend in with the crowd and make it impossible for witnesses to make a positive identification.

School boards will find that most students have no desire to join a gang. But students sometimes are recruited under duress. Other times, they join for protection from street violence or in search of a sense of identity and belonging.

Today, our society is creating new avenues for gang recruitment, he added. One Chicago student made a friend on MySpace who turned out to be a gang member. The student ended up joining.

Gang activity outside the schools obviously has an impact on school safety, and school officials must continue to be diligent in their efforts to keep gang activity, symbols, colors, and hand signs outside the school building.

To do that, however, school board mem-

bers must look beyond the schools—and build collaborative partnerships with community groups and government agencies, said Kathleen Bowles, supervisor of safe and healthy schools for the Duval County, Fla., school system.

Agreeing with that assessment was Joe Melita, executive director of the special investigative unit of the Broward County (Fla.) Public Schools and a member of the county's multi-agency gang task force. He added that an effective anti-gang strategy could be something as simple as better communications between school officials and police officers on the street.

School resource officers (SROs) also are great assets, he said. Many students are afraid of police officers on the street, but SROs should be building relationships with students, gathering information about gang activity, and helping head off problems before they arise.

Any anti-gang program must be shaped to meet local conditions. "Something that's effective in Boise, Idaho, is not going to work in Chicago," Everage said. "Instead of looking for products, you need to be looking at strategies and techniques."

CUBE in Brief

Steering Committee Special Election:

A special election will take place at the CUBE Issues Seminar in Miami this June to fill a vacant spot on the committee.

CUBE's web site has been updated.

You can find presentations from prior conferences, research reports, and data to support your district. www.nsba.org/cube

Coming soon:

Urban Edge—a bi-monthly newsletter with news links, ideas that impact CUBE districts, and NSBA happenings.

Save the Date!

CUBE's Annual Conference in Las Vegas, September 25-28, 2008.

For more information or if you have questions, contact Kevin Scott, Membership Services Manager at kscott@nsba.org or 703-838-6232.

www.nsba.org/cube

Principal tells CUBE members to spread message of hope

When Salome Thomas-El launched an after-school chess program at Philadelphia's Vaux Middle School, he was hoping to keep his inner-city students off the streets and create an opportunity for them to improve critical thinking skills.

He had no inkling, of course, that his students would go on to become eight-time national chess champions. Nor could he have known that he would raise their expectations of themselves—and inspire hundreds to graduate and go on to college or university.

But that's exactly what happened. And why the nationally acclaimed educator was keynote speaker for CUBE during the NSBA Annual Conference.

Others who've heard him speak about

urban education have suggested he sounds "more like a preacher than a teacher," Thomas-El told his audience of urban school leaders. But that description is just fine with him. "This is a ministry, folks."

The reality is that a key role of urban educators is to inspire and motivate inner-city students, he said. "For many children, school is their home," he said. "It's the only place where they feel safe."

Today, Thomas-El is a principal at Philadelphia's Russell Byers Public Charter School and coordinates after-school chess programs for the city school system.

What's helped inspire him over the years is the pride in seeing other students succeed academically and take steps to a more promising future, Thomas-El said. One day,

he recalled, he received a telephone call from a former student who announced he was graduating from college—and was inspired to make the long trip to attend the student's graduation ceremony.

What was particularly telling, he said, was that no one from the young man's family saw him receive his degree. But several former teachers from his school were there.

Such support is key to the success of urban education, Thomas-El concluded. "The children you work with are blessed to have people like you and [other educators]," he said. "That's so encouraging for young people" who experience so much violence, disappointment, and neglect. "The only thing they want to hear from an adult is, 'I'm here today, and I'll be here tomorrow.'"

CUBE releases third climate survey examining parent attitudes

Parents who rely on their community newspapers for information about their schools are more likely to have lower opinions about school safety, the commitment of teachers, and the chances for student academic success.

That was one of the conclusions from parental responses in *What We Think: Parental Perceptions of Urban School Climate*.

The third in a series of CUBE surveys examining school climate in the nation's urban schools, *What We Think* found notable differences in parent opinions depending on what sources of information they rely upon, says Brian Perkins, chief investigator of the study and a professor of education law and policy at Southern Connecticut State University.

Among parents who rely on newspapers for information about their schools, 38.5 percent believe schools are unsafe—or are unsure about their safety. Only 23.9 percent of parents with personal experience in the schools have similar opinions.

At the same time, nearly one-third of parents believe some children carry guns or knives to school, if those parents rely on newspapers for information, Perkins says. That's compared to only 11.1 percent of parents who rely primarily on their child to provide such information.

Asked if their children can score high on standardized test scores, parents who rely on newspapers are twice as skeptical as parents who have a personal experience with the schools.

Among parents who rely on children for

their opinions, more than 85 percent believe teachers care about students. But only 57 percent of parents agree if they depend on a newspaper to shape their views.

As Perkins notes, the findings won't be a shock to school board members who have long bemoaned the negative coverage of local newspapers.

Still, this negative influence of newspapers needs to be reflected in school district marketing efforts, he says. If the media is undermining parent opinions of the schools, then what is it doing to the attitudes of the majority of taxpayers who have no children in school?

Looking at the survey's overall results, it's clear that parents largely recognize the quality and hard work of urban schools, notes Perkins, past chair of CUBE.

Most parents agree that schools are a safe place for children (75.3 percent), they often visit their child's school (75.5 per-

cent), they believe their children can succeed academically (84 percent), and they trust their child's teachers (84 percent).

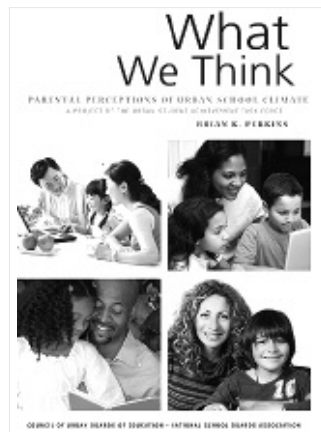
Yet, school board members need to pay attention to the smaller number of parents who express less confidence in their schools, he adds. Their opinions point to issues that likely need addressing, even if the origins of their opinions aren't clear at first.

"School systems are almost as complex as biological systems," he says. "That means if we have something out of whack, it may not be what we think. You can have something wrong with your foot that has nothing to do with your foot. It might have something to do with your heart. Maybe you don't have enough power in your heart to get blood down to your foot."

The analogy works for schools, he says. In one school, for instance, standardized test scores might suffer because of something seemingly unrelated to instruction, such as how safe children feel—and how focused they are on learning rather than their safety.

Over the past two years, two previous surveys have examined issues surrounding school climate. The first, *Where We Learn*, focused on the attitudes of students towards schools; the second, *Where We Teach*, examined the opinions of teachers and administrators.

What We Think is being distributed to school leaders in all CUBE member districts. Copies of the earlier reports are available online at www.nsba.org/cube.



Urban districts continue to target underperforming schools

Having lost patience with more modest school reform initiatives—and pressured by the tough mandates of the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB)—more urban schools are taking dramatic action to “turn around” low-performing schools.

In Dallas, seven schools consistently rated as academically unacceptable on state measures are slated for reconstitution in the 2008-09 school year, say district officials. Twenty-five teachers will be removed from the campuses, either transferred or dismissed because of student test scores or poor classroom effectiveness as measured by the district.

“Schools must be reconstituted in order to comply with the state’s requirements and also to guarantee to parents and the community that all efforts are being taken to ensure that students are well prepared for college and the work force,” Superintendent Michael Hinojosa said in a statement. “The district will redouble its efforts to make certain that schools get the resources they need to improve their status.”

School restructuring has been an increasingly common intervention in recent years, as school systems struggle to



An 11th-grader reacts to her tutor at East High School in Salt Lake City. With the lowest graduation rate in the district, East High offers its 300 students a variety of interventions, including a sizable cadre of tutors.

find a solution to persistently poor-achieving schools. But the pace of such school turnovers, school restructuring, and school reconstitutions appears to be increasing as more schools fail for the third, fourth, and fifth year to meet adequate yearly progress (AYP) goals mandated by NCLB.

In Chicago, officials recently announced a \$10.3 million grant from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation to support efforts to transform underperforming schools.

Chicago restructured its first school in

2006 and targeted eight new schools this year. The city also is in the midst of a comprehensive focus on high school reform—an initiative not as drastic as a full restructuring but still demanding schools accept new curricula and teacher training.

“Most of our schools have been enjoying dramatic gains over the last several years . . . [but] the turnaround model, however, where children stay in their school and a new school principal and new teachers move in, has proven to be very effective,” CPS Chief Education Officer Barbara Eason-Watkins has said.

Still, some urban districts—from Boston to Miami, and from New York City to Los Angeles—

have found such dramatic intervention efforts are not universally successful. A Boston-based research group, the Mass Insight Education and Research Institute, recently proposed a modified approach it thinks might help. It suggests a closer state, district, and school collaboration revolving around small, specialized teams of “turnaround specialists,” more state resources, more district technical assistance, and greater flexibility from state rules.

For information, visit www.massinsight.org.

Boston campaign highlights high school successes

The smiling faces of students portrayed on advertisements in Boston buses, subways, and transit stations are the first wave of a new public awareness campaign aimed at highlighting the transformation of the city’s high schools.

In the “Next Stop, College” campaign, former and current students describe how their high schools prepared them to achieve college and career goals, say school officials. The first ads appeared in February.

Future ads are expected to expand to newspapers, bus shelters, and movie theaters. The campaign is funded by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation and the

Carnegie Corporation.

The campaign’s goal is to build public support for the school system’s efforts to create more rigorous academic programs in high schools. Many schools now are organized into smaller learning environments and experimenting with new programs and flexibility.

The school system also can boast evidence of dramatic improvements, including a more than 300-percent increase in students passing the 10th-grade state math exam on their first attempt, a 30-point-plus increase in reading and math SAT scores, and a sizable enrollment increase in Advanced Placement courses.



Carla Gualdrón, a senior at Media Communications Technology High School, is one of several students highlighted in Boston’s “Next Stop, College” campaign to build public awareness for the city’s high schools.



The sleek design of Cristo Rey Jesuit High School incorporates features that promote student learning but also opens the building to innovative community partnerships.

International school designs offer promising ideas for U.S. cities

Perhaps urban school leaders should take a few lessons from Europe about how to wisely spend billions of dollars on new school construction and renovation.

Some architects believe so. At a recent symposium in Washington, D.C., titled “Defining the 21st Century Urban School,” panelists suggested that school design in the U.S. is lagging behind more forward-thinking practices overseas. And those outdated designs are being built outside the neighborhoods they serve, thus missing opportunities to engage and improve those communities and provide other services and benefits.

“It’s very common for urban districts to apply suburban solutions, and move to the edge of a community where nobody can walk to school,” says Ronald Bogle, president and CEO of the American Architectural Foundation.

It’s true that finding suitable and affordable school sites is a challenge for urban school leaders, architects say. But one solution used in other countries is the co-location of schools with other agencies. Such partnerships can greatly benefit the school as well as the surrounding neighborhoods.

“Education can contribute to the economic development of a community,” suggests Jeff Lackney, an architect with Fielding Nair International. His firm helped build and renovate neighborhood schools in Milwaukee, after extensive conversations with community members revealed the need for a neighborhood-oriented approach.

For those projects, he says, Fielding Nair helped coordinate projects

between the school district and other organizations to provide expanded prekindergarten classes, before and after-school care, and small class sizes.

School architects are also looking for inspiration abroad, particularly in Europe, Canada, and Australia, where neighborhood schools have long been designed to offer community services and coordinate programs between government agencies.

Panelists from Zurich, Switzerland, which has seven school districts, say their city has focused on building sustainable, environmentally friendly designs that can be a “common resource” for their neighborhoods.

An exhibit of recently built schools in Switzerland and nearby countries showed buildings that look dramatically different—extremely modern, angled structures of steel and glass. Those schools often have fewer corridors, a variety of classroom sizes and spaces, and use sustainable energy such as regenerative heating systems and solar power.

Young students tend to stay in school for longer hours—sometimes arriving as early as 7 a.m. and leaving as late as 6 p.m.—as most schools provide child care before and after hours.

Surprisingly, Zurich districts have no set standards for the design of schools because they want to encourage young architects to come forward with new ideas, says panelist Tony Vinzins, director of Zurich’s School and Sport Department.

“Other cities have large books of standards, but we don’t because we feel we are a learning organization,” he says.

WICHITA ENDS BUSING, FACES CONCERNS OVER RENEWED SEGREGATION

A vote by the Wichita, Kan., school board to end its decades-old student busing plan has raised concerns that the city will follow the trend of other urban communities nationwide—where local schools are experiencing an increase in the number of racially isolated students.

Yet school leaders say they saw little choice in their decision. In July 2007, the U.S. Supreme Court struck down student assignment plans in Seattle and Louisville, Ky., that based assignments partly on the race of students. Although the high court did not prohibit such policies in all circumstances, its ruling set strict limits on the options available to educators.

Since then, many urban school boards have scrambled for a strategy to balance the educational value of integrated schools with the limited options still legally viable. The Jan. 28 decision in Wichita was simply the latest sign that such strategies are proving elusive for policymakers.

That has some Wichita residents concerned. Although only 1,200 of the nearly 50,000 students in the city are affected, some say a greater degree of racial isolation among students will be harmful. “From the community’s perspective . . . there was a lot of apprehension and fear and a great deal of questions,” says school board member Betty Arnold.

Wichita school officials say they are sensitive to community concerns about racial diversity in classrooms and the return of “separate but unequal” schools. As a result, the new attendance plan will continue to support a magnet program. The school board also voted to hire a director of equity and accountability.

“Our district’s families and the community at large have told us loud and clear that they place a high value on diverse schools, that is a real strength of our district,” Superintendent Winston Brooks said after the school board’s unanimous vote.

Metro tax plan raises capital funds for Oklahoma City schools

Stacey Hollenbeck

What was once a visionary capital improvement program designed to enhance public services and facilities in Oklahoma City is now helping the city build and improve educational facilities for its schoolchildren.

Since 2001, the MAPS for Kids program has provided city students with three new high schools, nine newly renovated schools, 25 new fire alarm systems, 14 new school roofs, and millions of dollars worth of new computers.

The program was part of the Metropolitan Area Projects (MAPS) program, launched in 1993 to finance municipal parks, government offices, sports stadiums, and other improvements to the city. Seven years ago, Mayor Kirk Humphreys expanded the program to include school construction.

With voter approval, the MAPS for Kids initiative has pumped nearly \$700 million into the school system in the last few years. The money was raised from a one-cent increase in sales tax and a \$180 million bond issue.

The sales tax increase ends this year, but city leaders say the construction and renovation of schools in and around the city will continue to benefit students for many generations.

"How could you not be delighted with it?" asks Al Basey, acting chair of the Oklahoma City Board of Education. "There was a problem, and the people asked to fix it. And they're willing to put their time and money into it. You couldn't ask for more."

Basey became a member of the board a year after MAPS for Kids took effect, citing the program as the reason he joined. "Being a long-time businessman, I thought, 'You better go in there and watch that money.'"

The school board works closely with the city council and the Oklahoma City Metropolitan Area Public Schools (OCMAPS) Trust to approve major budgeting decisions.

"The school board is busy, but they do weigh in on construction recommendations," says Carl Edwards, chair of the seven-member trust. "We listen to what their comments are, and we take them into consideration."



Martin Luther King Jr. Elementary School is a \$10 million, PK-6 facility financed by MAPS for Kids, a capital improvement program that's greatly improved school facilities in Oklahoma City.

The trust governs school site purchases, the building of facilities, improvements to old schools, the demolition of others, and upgrades in transportation.

While transportation goals already have been met, other projects are moving at a slower pace. According to the OCMAPS 2007 annual report, 39 schools still need to undergo improvements.

Those improvements can be costly. Oklahoma City's newest high schools average \$25 million each.

So far, about half of the MAPS for Kids money has been either spent or earmarked for future projects, says Edwards. "We spent \$10 million on student computers, and we probably spent another \$2 to \$3 million on mobile stations you can take room to room."

Edwards says technological advances will improve student performance while helping schools communicate better with one another and administrative buildings.

A partnership with the Dell computer company helped Oklahoma City cut down on computer costs. And Edwards expects that improvements in transportation and equipment will minimize maintenance and operational costs in the long run.

Officials also hope new schools and buses will help the district attract students who attend private or parochial schools.

Although money is designated for physi-

cal improvements, MAPS for Kids is not simply an enormous and expensive construction project. The school board and superintendent also are working to support learning at new and renovated facilities by improving school staffs, Basey says.

"To lead you have to have the right people," he says. "We're responsible for getting the right leaders in the right place at the right time and we sure work hard at it."

Schools outside the city limits also are benefitting from MAPS for Kids. About \$150 million dollars in program funds is going to suburban districts in the name of equity.

The OCMAPS Trust also has tried to fairly distribute funds based on each school's need.

"We are doing everything the same so nobody can point a finger and say somebody in a rich part of town got a nicer school than somebody in a poor part of town," Edwards says.

While Edwards says he has gotten nothing but "glowing comments" about MAPS for Kids, Basey says citizens have been critical of the program's slow pace.

"They want it to move faster," he says. "I don't blame them. I'm impatient, too."

Stacey Hollenbeck (shollenbeck@nsba.org) is a contributing editor to Urban Advocate and American School Board Journal's spring intern.

PARENTS

Continued from page 1

Sandy Moise, dean of Miami-Dade's Parent Academy, who adds that school leaders will find a hunger among parents for such efforts. "Parents want it. Parents want more information on how to help their children."

Of course, urban school leaders have been echoing that refrain for years—yet have not always been consistent in matching their rhetoric to practice. Meanwhile, at the school level, some principals and teachers have been less than enthusiastic about inviting parents to do much more than attend PTA meetings and organize school fundraisers.

But attitudes are changing, at least in school districts where school boards and superintendents are making a clear and consistent priority of parental outreach. These efforts also are noteworthy for their emphasis on recruiting parents as an active partner on the home front.

"To be effective, programs and practices that engage families should be focused in some way on improving achievement," notes *A New Wave of Evidence: The Impact of School, Family, and Community Connections on Student Achievement*, a study published by the Southwest Educational Development Laboratory.

"This does not mean," the study continues, "that the school should abandon engaging families in school-improvement committees or stop holding open houses or family nights. Nor does it mean that family activities should be test-preparation drills. Aim for balance."

For many, the definition of balance has changed since the No Child Left Behind Act created adequate yearly progress (AYP) goals that have put student achievement in the spotlight. It's not enough, any more, to invite select parents to serve on school improvement councils with the goal of getting input on decisions. Progress must be faster, and the parental role must be more specific to student achievement. Thus, there is a crucial need to get parents checking homework, setting up a quiet place for students to do school work, and raising expectations.

The importance of such efforts has long since been established. In a summary of research by Johns Hopkins University's National Network of Partnership Schools, written by Joyce L. Epstein, it was clear that family involvement affects student achievement.

"When educators communicated effectively and involved family and community members in activities focused on student behavior, schools reported fewer disciplinary actions," Epstein wrote. "Similarly, the percentage of students attaining math proficiency increased from one year to the next in schools where educators imple-

mented math homework that required parent-child interactions and offered math materials for families to take home."

In urban neighborhoods, school officials are finding practical obstacles to achieving such ideals. Many parents have a limited education themselves and feel ill-equipped to help their children aca-



Anne Thompson, director of Miami-Dade County's Office of Parental Involvement, meets with the executive board of the district's Parent Leadership Council. The council allows parents of English language learners to make recommendations for improving English learning.

MIAMI-DADE GOAL IS TRAINING PARENTS TO HELP STUDENTS

The goal of the Miami-Dade County Parent Academy is to teach parents how to become active and effective partners in their children's education.

"We offer workshops . . . about 120 to 150 per month on various topics—helping your child learn, family building, a better readers program," says Sandy Moise, dean of the Parent Academy. "Other strands deal with health and wellness . . . and we also have computer and technology classes."

Such programming is popular, and thousands have shown up at what's known as "Family Learning Events" at the zoo and a popular museum.

The academy has no brick-and-mortar address, Moise says. It is a concept—a program—designed to bring

educational opportunities to parents in any community inside the city/county school system of 400,000. Workshops are offered in schools, company offices, bookstores, parks, museums, and other locations convenient to parents.

By emphasizing the role of parents in a child's education, the district also is emphasizing the partnership between parents and schools, Moise says. And that goes a long way to building parental involvement in other ways.

"We've really seen a tidal wave of parental involvement, not only in the Parent Academy but just in a general," she says.

It's also a great financial deal for the district: Corporate and charitable sponsors support the entire cost of the program.

demically. Others work two jobs or lack the parenting skills to ensure students complete their homework or have a quiet, established place to work.

Among educators, there's also no firm agreement on the exact role of parents. "Is it attendance at PTA meetings? Is it attendance at every parent-teacher con-

ference? Or is it ensuring that children's homework is done?" asks David Guzman, Fort Worth's director of parent engagement.

The answer is that parental involvement must be determined on a case-by-case basis, and thus it is teachers and administrators at the school level who

must lead any initiative directed at parents, he adds. "Every school is different. We look at one school where they have hundreds of parents coming out to the building and volunteering, and their outreach may be quite different from a school where they're struggling to get parents involved."

Yet, at the same time, school officials say that the impetus for such efforts starts with the central office and school board.

"Each school has different personalities, different human resources, and different populations they are serving, so there has to be a little room for how you do it," says Karen Richardson, deputy superintendent for family and community engagement in the Boston Public Schools. "But the district needs to set the tone from the top."

That was the case in Miami, where the Parent Academy was an initiative of Superintendent Rudy Crew and backed by the school board. It was Crew and the school board that set the priority, assigned funds and manpower to the task, and held people accountable for results, says Anne Thompson, director of Miami-Dade's Office of Parental Involvement.

"Everything we do goes back to the fact that we have a board policy that defines parental involvement and expectations for the schools, and that is the base on which to build all other programs," Thompson says.

From the school board's perspective, it is vision that's key, says Fort Worth school board member Christine Moss, who also serves on the CUBE Steering Committee. Her board made parent and community engagement one of the three main goals of its strategic plan.

"We created a department just to outreach to the community and to parents," she says. "The board approved a parent liaison for each school in our district. Our role is ensuring that the department has the resources it needs to make it successful."

In Norfolk, Va., the school board also has made parental involvement a key part of its strategic goals, says school board member Lillian Wright. But too many parents themselves lack a good education—and thus fail to recognize the importance of education for their children.

For that reason, Norfolk's Parent Center provides assistance on a range of topics, including parenting skills, nutrition, drug abuse prevention, child safety, computer technology, and helping with homework, reading, and math. Parents also can get help earning a high school equivalency degree (GED).



The Bicycle Rodeo at Fort Worth's North Riverside Elementary School is just one of many parent-oriented events, including a "Grandparent Giddyup" breakfast and Spaghetti Western Dinner, designed to promote adult involvement in the school life of children.

FORT WORTH STRATEGIC GOALS GUIDE OUTREACH EFFORTS

When the Fort Worth Independent School District piloted a parental outreach program developed by the National Network of Partnership Schools at Johns Hopkins University, officials weren't really surprised to find parental involvement increased in nine out of 10 schools.

What did surprise them, however, was a look at parental involvement in a control group of schools not using the program: There, parental involvement was declining.

This year, says David Guzman, the district's director of parent engagement, Fort Worth expanded the program to 31 schools. In each, officials created site-based "action teams" of administrators, teachers, parents, and community leaders to look at their school improvement plans and "figure out ways to

partner with families and communities to reach those goals."

As a result, schools hoping to boost reading skills have organized "literacy nights" for parents, while others looking to boost math scores have offered workshops giving parents some prep work in the subject.

At the same time, the schools are attempting to provide more general services to make parents—particularly immigrants—more comfortable working with the schools. School-based parent liaisons have organized workshops on seeking jobs, filing tax reports, and applying to college. One school set up a mother-daughter health fair that included massages and manicures.

"Some of our schools have done some really fun and innovative things to open the doors and show that our schools are welcoming," Guzman says.

"It's just one step toward helping them to become a better parent," she says.

No one is suggesting that parent outreach efforts will convert thousands of parents into active partners with the schools—nor find parents working two jobs the time to help students with homework.

But such initiatives will find fertile ground among parents who would like to play a more influential role in their children's education—but don't know how.

"You have to try to raise the bar and make it easy for families to get involved," says Miami-Dade school board member Ana

Rivas Logan, also a CUBE Steering Committee member. "I think you can expect some success. And we can do better."

Del Stover (dstover@nsba.org) is editor of Urban Advocate and a senior editor of American School Board Journal.



Parents attend a workshop for volunteers conducted by Boston Partners in Education, a community group that supports and trains those who want to help out at local schools.

BOSTON PARENT COORDINATORS FORGE RELATIONSHIPS

Before schools can get parents more involved in student learning, PTA meetings, or the work of a school's leadership council, educators need to get parents in the schools—and get them comfortable with being at school.

In Boston, that task is increasingly assigned to school-based parent outreach coordinators "whose purpose is to help build some bridges between home and school," says Karen Richardson, the district's deputy superintendent for family and community engagement. "Their job is about creating welcoming environments in schools and building parent leadership."

Such efforts can start modestly, with a breakfast that brings together parents and teachers to talk about the curriculum and instruction for a school's sixth-graders, she says. Parent engagement also is sparked parent by parent, such as

by helping a mother who needs some friendly guidance before meeting with a teacher about her child's problems at school.

In one school, a coordinator organized a "Dad's Club" to introduce more adult male role models for students, Richardson says. Fathers and grandfathers meet once a month, perhaps talk about an issue of concern to them, such as men's health issues, and then visit a classroom to read to students or volunteer to oversee the playground.

Officials also are reaching out to non-English-speaking parents. Recently, when officials held a community forum in a predominately Hispanic neighborhood, the conversation was conducted in both English and Spanish.

"The feedback was phenomenal in that families really felt really welcome," Richardson says.

TELEPHONE MESSAGES STRENGTHEN LINK TO HOUSTON PARENTS

Sometimes, it's just about keeping parents informed. That could be the mantra for the Houston Independent School District (HISD), which has discovered its automated telephone message system helps strengthen relationships with parents.

Connect-ED, a commercial system used by 13,000 sites nationwide, was installed in 2006 and quickly proved an effective way for officials to communicate the latest news to parents, says HISD spokesman Terry Abbott.

Such outreach might seem relatively mundane, given that many districts rely on e-mail or phone messages to deliver announcements to parents, Abbott says. But what has made the phone system so successful in Houston is its use for more personal parental outreach.

Some principals, for example, send out congratulations to parents whose children earn some distinction at school, and district personnel send out surveys asking all 200,000 HISD families to offer their opinions on future district decisions. To date, more than 3.3 million messages have gone out to parents.

Although a few parents have griped about the growing number of phone messages, most seem pleased, Abbott says. When a national brand of peanut butter was recalled for possible salmonella contamination, the district sent out a phone alert that it was confiscating all student-carried lunches containing peanut butter and substituting a free cafeteria meal in its place.

"The reaction from parents was just astounding," Abbot says. "They were calling us and telling us how much they appreciated the notification."

Smaller class sizes may not help reduce achievement gap

Northwestern study suggests high achievers benefit more from smaller class sizes

By Del Stover

Smaller classes are a good thing. That widely held assumption has fueled countless efforts by urban school boards and state lawmakers to allocate precious funds to shrink class sizes and, hopefully, boost student academic performance.

But a new study out of Northwestern University suggests policymakers need to put a little more thought into what they can hope to achieve with an investment in class-size reduction. The reality might be that high-performing students benefit more from smaller classes than they do their academically struggling classmates.

“While decreasing class size may

increase achievement levels on average for all types of students, it does not appear to reduce the achievement gap within a class,” Spyros Konstantopoulos, assistant professor of Northwestern’s School of Education and Social Policy,

concluded in a statement announcing his findings.

Using data from Project STAR, a massive study of Tennessee schoolchildren in the 1980s, researchers years ago found solid evidence that small class sizes have a positive impact on student performance. And that’s fueled numerous class size reduction initiatives across the nation, with some of the largest being statewide efforts in California and Florida.

Konstantopoulos’ research, published in the March issue of *Elementary School Journal*, doesn’t contradict these earlier assumptions. But it does suggest that across-the-board reductions in class size aren’t likely to close the achievement gap between affluent and poor students.

It might even widen the gap, as Konstantopoulos found the “variability” of achievement—the academic difference between lowest to highest-achieving students—was greater in classes of 13 to 17 children than in larger classes of 22 to 26 children.

His theory: That “it is likely that high achievers are more engaged in learning opportunities and take advantage of the teaching practices that take place in small classes, or that they create opportunities for their own learning in small classes.”

Does this mean urban school boards should not support smaller class sizes? No. Konstantopoulos’ research doesn’t delve into issues of policy. But his findings certainly raise some interesting questions about how to get the biggest “bang for your buck” when investing in smaller class sizes—and how to close the achievement gap.

For example, a school district with limited resources might consider targeting class-size moneys at low-achieving schools or schools with high concentrations of students in poverty.

Konstantopoulos’ research also found evidence that the academic benefits of small classes were strongest in kindergarten and first grade, hinting at the possibility that the first years of school are a cost-effective target for class-size reduction efforts.

$$\hat{\theta}_j = \left(\sum e_{ij}^2 \right) / v_j$$

where θ is the residual achievement variation in class j , e represents the student-specific residuals in class j , and v_j indicates the degrees of freedom with which θ is estimated.

As the citation above makes clear, sections of Konstantopoulos’ article are almost unintelligible to the average reader because of its reliance on academic jargon. That said, the author’s conclusions are described plainly enough—and are useful for urban policymakers interested in the value of smaller class sizes.

REALITY: BE WATCHFUL OF CLASS SIZE COSTS

Are some policymakers so eager to seize upon the advantages of smaller class sizes that they don’t always invest taxpayer dollars as wisely as they might?

It’s a question worth asking. Studies suggesting the advantages of smaller class sizes helped convince lawmakers years ago in California to launch an expensive class-size reduction program statewide.

But that approach appears to discount studies suggesting the greatest benefits occur when schools cut overly large classes down to size or target at-risk children for smaller classes. It’s also been a costly strategy that diverted funds some believe could have been better spent supporting other intervention strategies for low-achieving students.

“I think what they did is not what the research says—but class-size reduction is a popular reform, parents love it, and it’s very tangible,” Dan Goldhaber, a professor with the University of Washington’s Evans School of Public

Affairs, told *American School Board Journal* last fall.

Indeed, several states and school districts are discussing class-size reductions, and some are looking to extend their efforts into the upper grades, although the bulk of research on the issue has focused on the elementary grades.

Others are thinking of slowing down their efforts. Although Florida has a constitutional amendment mandating specific class-size limits, state officials looking at legislation that would give schools more flexibility in future class-size reductions because of costs.

In the long run, experts, say, school boards need to look hard at the available research to determine what small class sizes actually can accomplish. Some studies, for example, have shown that smaller class are more effective in kindergarten and first grade, while another study suggests students need four full years in smaller classes to get any significant benefit.

full
page
ad