

**Best Practices for School, Family, and Community Engagement Subcommittee**  
*Report & Recommendations to the Lexington School Committee*  
June 8, 2010

## **Introduction & Rationale**

Across the country, school districts are engaged in conversations and research-based strategies designed to improve student learning. Among those strategies is evidence showing schools that partner with families<sup>1</sup> and community achieve a range of benefits for students, including improved school readiness, higher student achievement, better social skills and behavior, and increased high school graduation and preparation for college and career challenges.<sup>2</sup> The Lexington Public Schools had not engaged in conversations focused on family and community engagement as a strategy for improving student learning. As a starting point, one of the 2009-2010 School Committee goals is to assess best practices for school, family, and community engagement.<sup>3</sup>

The Best Practices for School, Family, and Community Engagement Subcommittee (BP/SFCES) was appointed by the Lexington School Committee in April 2010. Members are: Chair, Mary Ann Stewart; Secretary, Jennifer Vogelzang; Nancy Adler; Alessandro Alessandrini; and Kevin Johnson. The goal of the BP/SFCES is to present best practices for school, family, and community engagement and to make specific recommendations about how best to foster engagement in Lexington's Public Schools.

## **Discussion & Summary**

Research on family and community engagement over nearly forty years shows that when school staff, families, and community members work together to develop a system of supports for children, these collaborative efforts lead to better educational and developmental outcomes for children.<sup>4</sup> It is important to note that family engagement changes over time as children develop and transition to new learning environments.

We reviewed relevant websites, articles, reports, and book excerpts, and also drew upon relevant personal experiences to investigate and identify key best practices that promote greater engagement for potential implementation in the Lexington Public Schools. Key recommendations are also offered in this report.

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<sup>1</sup> The terms parent or family are intended to mean a natural, adoptive or foster parent, or other adult serving as a parent, such as a close relative, legal or educational guardian and/or a community or agency advocate.

<sup>2</sup> Desforges, C. & Abouchaar, A. (2003). *The impact of parental involvement, parental support, and family education on pupil achievements and adjustments: A literature review*. London: Department for Education and Skills; Fan, X., & Chen, M. (2001). Parental involvement and students' academic achievement: A meta-analysis. *Educational Psychology Review*, 13 (1), 1-22.

<sup>3</sup> Goal #6, Lexington Public Schools, School Committee Goals for 2009-2010  
<http://lps.lexingtonma.org/Current/LPSSCgoals0910.pdf>

<sup>4</sup> Henderson, A., & Mapp, K. (2002). *A new wave of evidence: The impact of school, family, and community connections on student achievement*. Austin: Southwest Educational Development Laboratory.

Much of our discussion centered on how engagement systems will be successfully integrated and sustained. There is a lot more to engagement than persuading parents to support district initiatives; clear family-school communication seems obvious and community engagement, integral.<sup>5</sup> Upgraded school facilities, improved school leadership and staffing, higher quality learning programs for students, and new resources and programs to improve teaching and curriculum are key indicators showing community engagement in schools improves educational opportunities for children and adults. All elements of school improvement are more likely to succeed if parents help students focus on learning and teachers create effective partnerships with parents.

## Family & Community Engagement

The BP/SFCES reviewed the Harvard Family Research Project<sup>6</sup> Issue Brief, *"Seeing is Believing: Promising Practices for How School Districts Promote Family Engagement"*.<sup>7</sup> The authors present family engagement as a critical component for a child's success "from cradle to career". Family engagement in a child's education can be cost-effective, for example, schools would have to spend \$1,000 more per pupil to reap the same gains in student achievement that an involved parent brings.<sup>8</sup>

We reviewed critical success factors of the six school districts highlighted in the brief, noting three core components identified as best practices for systemic family engagement: fostering district-wide strategies, building school capacity, and reaching out to and engaging families. Generally speaking, the goal is to embed family engagement systemically, for example:

- In Wichita, KS family engagement is embedded into school district culture with a "customer" orientation, professional development focused on effective engagement strategies, and an annual parent survey.
- From Boston Public Schools we learned how district policy supports an infrastructure, articulates clear expectations for schools, provides comprehensive

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<sup>5</sup> In the 2000 census (<http://www.census.gov/main/www/cen2000.html>), for example, families with children in school made up ~25% or less of communities (nationwide). Engaging the larger percentage (75% or more) of community members is critical for supporting school budgets and overrides. We will see what the 2010 census has to tell us about the percentage of families and community members. The just-released Lexington Demographic Change Report shows how Lexington's demographics have changed over the past twenty years.

<sup>6</sup> A project of the Harvard Graduate School of Education.  
[www.hfrp.org](http://www.hfrp.org)

<sup>7</sup> *Seeing is Believing: Promising Practices for How School Districts Promote Family Engagement*. July 2009. Helen Westmoreland, Heidi M. Rosenberg, M.Elena Lopez, Heather Weiss.  
<http://www.hfrp.org/publications-resources/browse-our-publications/seeing-is-believing-promising-practices-for-how-school-districts-promote-family-engagement>

<sup>8</sup> Houtenville, A.J. & Conway, K.S. (2008). Parental effort, school resources, and student achievement. *Journal of Human Resources*, 43 (2), 437-453.

outreach efforts, and embeds professional development for engaging families in effective ways.

- Federal Way, WA co-constructed a shared vision, with a district-level parent committee and learning and accountability meetings. The focus on learning includes family-school communication and a parent leadership institute; community partnerships are purposeful and aligned with school goals.

The strategies employed in the above examples helped shape our understanding of what effective engagement is:

Effective engagement is a **shared responsibility** where schools and community organizations commit to engaging families in meaningful and culturally respectful ways and where families actively support their children's learning and development.

Engagement is **continuous across a student's life** - from birth and extending through college and career preparation programs.

Effective engagement is **carried out everywhere children learn** including homes, early childhood education programs, schools, after-school programs, faith-based institutions, playgrounds, and community settings.

When family engagement is effective, it promotes student success and is a critical component for continuous school improvement. Effective practice encompasses everything from a welcoming environment to effective communication to understanding how to navigate complex school systems and collaboration with community partners. Success factors include opportunities for engagement and promoting family role commitment, such as shared decision-makers in decisions affecting students, as partners in learning, and as advocates and advisors for their children. The "4 Versions of Family-School Partnerships" from *Beyond the Bake Sale – the Essential Guide to Family-School Partnerships*,<sup>9</sup> supports our understanding that communication as a key component to effective engagement.

### Best Practices & Recommendations

Research indicates that effective school, family, and community engagement is not a one-time program or choice of a good school, but rather a set of day-to-day practices, attitudes, beliefs and interactions which support learning everywhere children learn. Families, schools, and community groups need to work together to promote engagement that is systemic, sustained, and integrated into school improvement efforts so that students are prepared for transitions in their development and all along their educational career.

The Best Practices for School, Family, and Community Engagement Sub-committee has identified key best practices and offers specific recommendations that we

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<sup>9</sup> Henderson, A., Mapp, K., Johnson, V., Davies, D. (2007). *Beyond the Bake Sale: the Essential Guide to Family-School Partnerships*. New Press, p.14-18

believe will strengthen engagement and improve student learning in Lexington's Public Schools:

### **Key Best Practices**

- **District-wide Strategies:** write a parent involvement policy <sup>10</sup> and adopt a set of standards and indicators for family and community engagement (pre-K through age 22), including rubrics for assessment and evaluation.
- **Build School Capacity:** identify an administrator and an infrastructure to support and implement a strategic plan for family and community engagement across the district.
- **Reach out to and Engage Families:** promote professional development opportunities that support engagement for all families.

### **Recommendations**

#### **I. Communication**

As noted previously, communication is a key component necessary for fostering engagement. Federal law defines parent involvement as regular, two-way, and meaningful communication about student learning and other school activities.<sup>11</sup> We would add that meaningful communication is further attained between family members and school staff when it is in a manner, language, and mode of technology that family members can understand and access. Educational research and practice suggest that technology has the potential to benefit student academic performance <sup>12</sup> by enhancing instructional delivery and by strengthening parental involvement in students' education. In an effort to promote engagement between school and family so that families can support their students, we offer the following recommendations:

- Resources for all families, especially for families whose primary language is not English, should be available on the LPS website.

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<sup>10</sup> Section 1118 of Title I of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act/No Child Left Behind (ESEA/NCLB) 2002 reauthorization requires each Title I school and district to write a parent involvement policy that has been developed with and agreed upon by parents. The state education agency must monitor the school districts' Title I programs to make sure they carry out the law. If the district is not involving parents as the law requires, parents can appeal to the state. Additionally, no less than 1% of the district's Title I funds are to be used to foster and promote parent involvement throughout the district.

<http://www2.ed.gov/legislation/ESEA/sec1118.html>

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>12</sup> #2/B LPS 2009-2010 System Goals

<http://lps.lexingtonma.org/Current/LPSSystemGoals0910.pdf>

- System-wide school visitor guidelines would be adopted by January 2011. The guidelines would encourage parent involvement and observation of all classrooms using Boston Public Schools' School Visitors Guidelines as a model.<sup>13</sup>
- Ideally, teachers respond to parent emails or phone calls within two school days, and provide an acknowledgement of the communication. Principals, ideally, develop and communicate a follow-through policy that parents are encouraged to follow, if communication isn't timely (January 2011).
- Ideally, teachers make a similar effort responding to student emails, so that students take responsibility for their own learning and parents can get out of the middle of the communications. It's important to recognize that in reality, students may not have a friend in their class that they're able or willing to contact to ask a question or get clarification of an assignment.
- Consistent with current objectives, move all assignments online at the high school and middle schools in the near term (September 2010).
- Report progress online in the high school and middle schools in the medium-near term (September 2011), including all graded work and progress currently recorded elsewhere, with progress updated at least every two weeks.
- Parents may obtain access to student progress after participating in "progress management training" for a shared understanding between school and family (mechanism to be co-constructed; online; password granted upon completion).

## II. Professional Development

Teachers today encounter a myriad of parental circumstances (*e.g.*, single parents, high poverty), challenging parent behaviors (*e.g.*, demands, abuse, lack of interest), and parental and school obstacles to involvement (*e.g.*, cultural challenges, lack of time, feelings of inadequacy, an unwelcoming school structure, previous negative school experiences).<sup>14</sup> In an effort to integrate engagement strategies at all levels, we recommend that professional development opportunities be offered to train and support administrators, teachers, and staff, as well as opportunities for shared learning with parents, to fully engage all families across the district in the education of their children.

## III. Community Engagement

We continue to be encouraged by the School Department's increased transparency regarding budget expenditures. Dr. Ash is to be commended for his efforts reaching out to the community with respect to more transparency with school department finances, his work with the Action Plan for Equity and Excellence<sup>15</sup>, and communicating

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<sup>13</sup> Boston Public Schools – School Visitors Guidelines  
[http://www.bostonpublicschools.org/files/LGL-04 School Visitors Guidelines.doc](http://www.bostonpublicschools.org/files/LGL-04%20School%20Visitors%20Guidelines.doc)

<sup>14</sup> Better understanding how teachers interact effectively with all parents is crucial for improving educational outcomes. This is especially significant for the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards as one of their core propositions focuses on working collaboratively with parents. The board claims that strong interactions with parents are a key dimension of a well-qualified teacher.  
[http://www.nbpts.org/the\\_standards/the\\_five\\_core\\_propositio](http://www.nbpts.org/the_standards/the_five_core_propositio)

<sup>15</sup> *Action Plan for Equity and Excellence*, Lexington Public Schools, May 2009.  
[http://lps.lexingtonma.org/Current/CompleteActionPlan5\\_5\\_09.pdf](http://lps.lexingtonma.org/Current/CompleteActionPlan5_5_09.pdf)

school-related articles in our local news media. There are a number of civic, faith-based, and advocacy organizations in our community that take steps to enhance and improve our school system. In an effort to support, expand, and improve district-wide efforts for community engagement, we suggest the following:

- Offer presentations of key district initiatives at occasional monthly meetings of the Town Meeting Members Association Executive Committee, Chamber of Commerce Breakfast/Lunch Series, Lexington's preschool community (via LexFUN), Appropriation Committee, Capital Expenditures Committee, PTA Presidents Council, etc., and to families at key transitions, such as at Kindergarten, middle school, and high school orientations.
- Continue to strengthen each school's Site Council <sup>16</sup> with trainings offered by Massachusetts Association of School Committees (MASC); provide honest and timely information about budgets, policies, and student achievement; use data to identify problem areas for improvement; include data-informed family engagement strategies in school improvement goals.
- Encourage PTAs to include a solid cross section of a school's parent community to support school improvement, provide a training ground for civic leadership, and build support for the public schools.

## Conclusion

Because learning happens in the home, in school, and in the community, engagement is a shared responsibility and continuous across a child's life. In schools, engagement promotes student achievement, is essential for reform, and is cost-effective. A systemic approach underlies critical success factors.

Well-executed partnerships go hand-in-hand with school improvement. In the same way that the Equity and Excellence Committee <sup>17</sup> continues to identify school-based strategies for improving achievement, we believe the Best Practices for School, Family, and Community Engagement Subcommittee should continue to look at engagement as a strategy for continued school and student improvement.


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<sup>16</sup> Site Councils offer a built-in opportunity for all stakeholders (parents, teachers, administrators, students [at the high school], and community members) to be engaged in student learning and are one pathway that includes community members in decisions relative to school improvement.

<sup>17</sup> *Equity and Excellence Committee: Progress Report*. May 2010.  
<http://lps.lexingtonma.org/Current/EECPROGRESSREPORT11May10>

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[http://www.thenewpress.com/index.php?option=com\\_title&task=view\\_title&metaproductid=1296](http://www.thenewpress.com/index.php?option=com_title&task=view_title&metaproductid=1296)
3. Boston Public Schools – Visitor Guidelines  
[http://www.bostonpublicschools.org/files/LGL-04\\_School\\_Visitors\\_Guidelines.doc](http://www.bostonpublicschools.org/files/LGL-04_School_Visitors_Guidelines.doc)
4. Not yet released publicly, *Draft Guidelines for a Statewide Policy for Family Engagement*, April 2009. Based on PTA's **National Standards for Family-School Partnerships** customized for Massachusetts. Parent and Community Engagement and Involvement (PCEI) Advisory Council to the Massachusetts Board of Elementary and Secondary Education (BESE); presented at a regular BESE meeting, June 2009 (not yet voted on by BESE).
5. PTA's **National Standards for Family-School Partnerships**, originally written in 1997, adopted by more than 100 education organizations and associations, updated in 2007, including rubrics for assessment and evaluation. [http://www.pta.org/national\\_standards.asp](http://www.pta.org/national_standards.asp)
6. *Seeing is Believing: Promising Practices for How School Districts Promote Family Engagement*, July 2009; Helen Westmoreland, Heidi M. Rosenberg, M. Elena Lopez, Heather Weiss.  
<http://www.hfrp.org/publications-resources/browse-our-publications/seeing-is-believing-promising-practices-for-how-school-districts-promote-family-engagement>
7. Several articles on the impact of engaging families with technology:
  - [I Know What You Did Last Math Class](http://www.nytimes.com/2008/05/04/fashion/04edline.html?_r=1), NYT, 2008  
[http://www.nytimes.com/2008/05/04/fashion/04edline.html?\\_r=1](http://www.nytimes.com/2008/05/04/fashion/04edline.html?_r=1)
  - Montgomery County Public Schools website – Resources for Parents includes Online Services, such as Edline to monitor student's performance and keep in touch with teachers <http://www.montgomeryschoolsmd.org/parents/>
  - New Visions for Public Schools website - High schools in New York City have begun to engage families in students' academic success and college readiness by helping parents understand achievement data. Supporting parents in grasping and using this information is a shared responsibility among schools, families, and students. <http://www.hfrp.org/family-involvement/publications-resources/new-visions-for-public-schools-using-data-to-engage-families>
  - [Online Grades: The Mom Who Knew Too Much](http://columbianewsservice.com/2010/03/in-digital-age-online-report-cards-change-parent-student-teacher-dynamic/), from students at Columbia School of Journalism <http://columbianewsservice.com/2010/03/in-digital-age-online-report-cards-change-parent-student-teacher-dynamic/>
8. *The Missing Piece of the Proficiency Puzzle – Recommendations for Involving Families and Community in Improving Student Achievement*; Commissioner's Parent Advisory Council, Final Report to the Kentucky Department of Education, June 2007. Standards for involvement with rubric.  
<http://www.prichardcommittee.org/Portals/1059/The%20Missing%20Piece%20of%20the%20Proficiency%20Puzzle.pdf>




# School, Family and Community Engagement

Presented by

Best Practices for School, Family and  
Community Engagement Subcommittee

June 8, 2010



# How timely...

- May 5, 2010 - - Family Engagement in Education Act (HR.5211) introduced to US Congress
- May 25, 2010 - - Massachusetts Proficiency Gap Task Force recommended BESE adopt a statewide set of standards for engagement

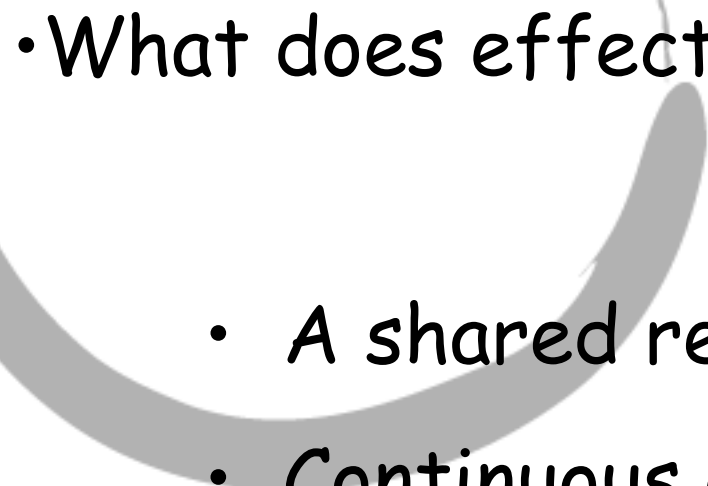



- What does effective engagement look like?




• What does effective engagement look like?

- A shared responsibility
- 

- 
- 
- What does effective engagement look like?
    - A shared responsibility
    - Continuous across a student's life



• What does effective engagement look like?

- A shared responsibility
  - Continuous across a student's life
  - Carried out everywhere children learn
- 



- What about engagement in Lexington?



## A TIME FOR CHANGE

### MOVE FROM...

Random acts of engagement

Events-driven

Add-on

Compliance

Institutional base-driven

### TO ...


Systemic approaches, research-based

Outcome-oriented

Integrated/embedded

Innovation

Learning-centered





# Best Practices & Recommendations

# Best Practices: District-wide Strategies



# Best Practices: Build School Capacity



# Best Practices:

## Reach out to & Engage Families





# Recommendations





Communication




# Communication

- Student Information Systems in districts nation-wide
- 




# Communication

- Student Information Systems in districts nation-wide
  - Improve efficiency and effectiveness of teacher-parent communications
- 



# Communication

- Student Information Systems in districts nation-wide
  - Improve efficiency and effectiveness of teacher-parent communications
  - Productive engagement of parents in grades K-12
- 

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## District-wide Recommendations K-12

- All assignments and progress online in middle and high schools by fall 2011

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## District-wide Recommendations K-12

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- LPS website resources and navigation

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- Productive engagement of parents in grades K-12

## District-wide Recommendations K-12

- All assignments and progress online in middle and high schools by fall 2011
  - Communicate student perspective to parents
- LPS website resources and navigation
- Timely email and phone communications

# COMMUNICATION


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- Improve efficiency and effectiveness of teacher-parent communications
- Productive engagement of parents in grades K-12

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  - Communicate student perspective to parents
- LPS website resources and navigation
- Timely email and phone communications
- School Visitors' Guidelines (Boston Public Schools)




# Professional Development

- Opportunities to train and support administrators, teachers, and staff
- 




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  - Opportunities for shared learning with families
- 




## Community Engagement

- Recognition of Transparency and increased community communication
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  - Strengthen PTA Engagement
- 



# THANK YOU!

Members of the Best Practices for School, Family  
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