

Organization Gives Support to Schools to Increase Fathers' Involvement

According to the 1997 study conducted by the National Center for Education Statistics, "children do better in school when their fathers are involved in their school, whether their fathers live with them or their mothers are involved." In fact, even after controlling for confounding demographic factors, father involvement correlated with children getting more As in school. NNPS district, state, and organization members are working to guide schools to turn these research statistics into reality for their students.

Identifying the Challenges

FamiliesFORWARD, a private, non-profit organization, and NNPS member, provides comprehensive services to Cincinnati Public Schools. The organization developed the program MalesFORWARD to discover why men were not participating in school-related activities and to initiate a program to increase their involvement. MalesFORWARD began with a focus group of 22 fathers representing 11 different schools, the schools' principals, the district superintendent, and the school board president to address male involvement. The men identified challenges to male involvement, including: the acceptance of the stereotype that education is a female responsibility; the inability to get time off from work during the day; the tendency to feel uncomfortable in school settings; and the lack of male role models in schools. Some of the solutions identified during the focus group included offering more flexible hours for school events and activities; creating a more

male-friendly environment; and encouraging better communication with fathers and male caregivers.

Taking Action

During the focus group, the men decided to launch the MalesFORWARD initiative with kick-off events at each school designed by the focus group participants. Over 300 men attended the kick-off events and signed up for future involvement activities such as volunteering in the classrooms, eating lunch with their children during the school day, organizing father/student basketball games, and working at school on special projects. Since the program's inception, schools have reported a significant increase, up to 300%, in male involvement in school conferences, school decision-making committees, and other school activities. Over and over again, students reported on program assessments that they enjoy their fathers' presence in the classroom.

Leadership Program Development

The FamiliesFORWARD organization has played an integral leadership role in supporting the establishment and development of the school-based MalesFORWARD programs. The organization offered an incentive to the fathers, a gift certificate to a local store, to come to the initial meeting. The organization obtained a grant from the Hamilton County Family and Children First Council for approximately \$6000 to fund the kick-off events at 13 different schools. Funding to continue the project each year has been supplied by FamiliesFOR-

WARD, as well as from donations by community members. The organization also connects with a third-party evaluator to assess the impact of the MalesFORWARD program annually. Furthermore, FamiliesFORWARD has asked the school board to establish MalesFORWARD Day as a district-wide initiative so that more men can become involved in their neighborhood schools. As an organization partner, FamiliesFORWARD has empowered schools to promote family involvement, and particularly father involvement, by providing them leadership, advocacy, evaluation, and funding.

For other examples of how your organization, district, or state may support father involvement, see the annual collections of *Promising Partnership Practices* to read what other NNPS members are doing around the nation. Also, the following resources might be helpful:

- National Center on Fathers and Families (www.ncoff.gse.upenn.edu)
- National Fatherhood Initiative (www.fatherhood.org)
- National Center for Fathering (www.fathers.com)
- *Fathers' Involvement in Their Children's Schools* (1997 report), National Center for Education Statistics (nces.ed.gov/pubs98/fathers/)

Thank you to Julie Theodore, Program Director, FamiliesFORWARD, for her contributions to this article.

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