

Leadership Line

In This Together: One District's Story of Building a Program of Partnerships

“We are a school district that has struggled to get our arms around parent involvement in a structured way. It has taken us a while to get to this point, but now we are moving in the right direction,” explained Dr. Brenda Holmes, Director of the Family and Community Partnerships Unit of Montgomery County Public Schools (MCPS) in Maryland.

MCPS, the 18th largest school district in the nation, has over 190 schools. The 2003-04 school year marked a new beginning for the district's efforts to build school and family partnerships. Using an organized approach, the MCPS Partnerships Unit's director and three facilitators began to provide vital program support to help the first cohort of schools develop their programs of family and community involvement.

The result? Twenty-seven schools created Action Teams for Partnerships (ATP) and began to implement goal-oriented partnership programs that are linked directly to their school improvement plans. MCPS' step-by-step approach provides an important story and useful guide for large and small districts.

Set Goals and Make Plans

MCPS began the year with specific goals in mind. The district leaders projected: “By the end of the 2003-04 school year, twenty-seven schools will have implemented comprehensive partnership programs linked to their school improvement plans using an action team approach.”

The goal was supported by a detailed outline of the tasks that would be conducted by the district facilitators, the school's ATPs, and school

principals throughout the school year. This included monthly site visits by district facilitators with each school's ATP; monthly ATP meetings; regular progress reports to the principals and to schools' leadership teams; a mid-year meeting for all ATP co-chairs and principals; and the completion by each ATP of NNPS' 2004 *UPDATE* survey to evaluate work and progress. All key stakeholders agreed to use the project plan as the compass for their first year of work on partnerships.

Connect Plans

MCPS leaders made an important link between the schools' One-Year Action Plans for partnerships and their school improvement plans. “We didn't want the action plan to be an island that was not connected to anything,” emphasized Holmes. The three district facilitators worked with their schools' ATPs to marry their goals and activities for partnerships to their school improvement goals. The schools then submitted their school improvement plans with their detailed plans for family and community involvement as one document to their community superintendents. The community superintendents hold the schools accountable for implementing their plans, while the Family and Community Partnerships Unit serves as the resource to assist schools with effective implementation of their partnership activities.

Support School Action Teams

The district provided training on partnerships to all schools' ATPs. The facilitators are charged with helping the ATPs find the resources they need in order to implement their planned activities. For example, the Partnerships Unit won an \$8,300 grant from a local family advocacy agency. Each facilitator attends the monthly ATP meetings at their designated schools. They offer on-going coaching, as needed, and always enthusiastically motivate and support their ATPs. “It's a religious kind of thing ... that nothing gets in the way of those meetings or any of those activities,” applauds Holmes of her team.

In less than a year, MCPS' district leaders and the 27 schools have gone from simply knowing how to implement an NNPS partnership program to truly feeling the value of their work. They are making the program their own. As Holmes described, more and more people are feeling, “Wow! This is what I want to be about when I am working with schools and families. It's that emerging passion for what could be that will propel us forward.” This spring the district will begin to “scale up” its program by inviting a second cohort of schools to join the burgeoning Montgomery County Network of Partnership Schools.

*By Natalie Rodriguez Jansorn
State and District Facilitator*



Cristina Riva-Chevez, Brenda Holmes (Director), Lola Crawford, Frank SooHoo, and Norma Montanaro.