

# Issues and Insights

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## District Leaders Share Secrets of 10 Years of Progress in Programs Partnerships

Every year, new districts join NNPS for research-based tools and materials to develop their programs of family and community involvement. A few districts have worked with NNPS since its start in 1996. To mark the 10th anniversary of NNPS, I interviewed two leaders in “charter” districts – Nina Menis of Naperville, IL (NINA) and Arlene Borner of District 112 in Chaska, MN (ARLENE). Naperville, with 21 schools, is an economically advantaged location, but has several schools that receive Title I funding. District 112 includes 12 schools that serve five communities in and around Chaska, including many economically stressed neighborhoods and a growing number of families who do not speak English at home.

Both district leaders conduct district-level activities and assist all schools in strengthening their partnership programs. The issues and insights of these district leaders are instructive. They tell some similar and some unique “secrets” that should help other district leaders develop and sustain successful partnership programs.

### **NNPS: What factors have helped you sustain your district’s partnership programs for the past 10 years?**

**NINA:** Three factors have been crucial for our work on partnerships. First, our Superintendent, Dr. Alan Leis, supports our work on partnerships 100% and has ideas for improvements. He attends all of our partnership meetings and sends a clear message – district-wide – that partnerships are a critical part of this district’s work. Second, it is important that my position is full time on partnerships. Districts should have a visible and dedicated “champion” to make sure that work on partnerships proceeds in every school. Finally, we have learned that school principals must fully support programs of family and community involvement. We have Principal and Parent Co-Chairs of the partnerships teams in each school and on the district-level advisory group, called our Core Team. By being active in the planning

process, our principals strongly support improving partnership programs.

**ARLENE:** We have benefited from the continuous support of the Community Education Department and from our prior and current Superintendent. Our new director, Jackie Johnston, strongly encourages our work and improvements. Also, we have sustained our work by developing a useful handbook for principals, and all schools use the NNPS framework of six types of involvement to select activities to involve all families.

District 112’s programs have benefited from having part-time Parent Involvement Coordinators (PICs) in every school. The principals say they “want their PICs” to assist the Action Teams for Partnerships. The PICs are parent leaders who earn about \$2,000 a year. Although I am a full time teacher, I also work with all of the PICs. We meet monthly to share ideas and keep improving the schools’ programs. My role as a teacher helps give credibility to the district’s leadership on partnerships. Our office also has a Parent Education Consultant and Volunteer Consultant who assist the PICs and schools with advice and resources for various activities.

The PICs know their schools really well and can customize partnership activities for their students and families. Our district has rural and urban sections, and a growing number of families who speak Spanish, Russian, Somali, and other languages. With our PICs and Consultants, we can conduct this work in all schools in a very thrifty way. This organization works for us.

### **NNPS: What results have you seen in your schools from the districts’ leadership on partnerships?**

**NINA:** Over time, all of our schools have become clearer about linking family and community involvement to the goals in their school improvement plans (SIP). This has made family and community involvement more “central” to school improvement. Our



**Naperville** Row 1: Jane Wernette, Terri Stevens, Karen Currier, Sandy Shamburek. Row 2: Julie Lichter, Gail Zeeb, Erica Eysturlid, Mike VanHarlingen, Kitty Murphy, Patti McIntire, Dr. Alan Leis (Superintendent), Lenore Johnson, Paul Schmidt, Nina Menis (NNPS Key Contact), Karen Noble, Sheila Sarovich, Debbie Shipley.



**District 112** Row 1: Jill Anderson, Jackie Christenson, and Debi Ylitalo. Row 2: Denise Cboiniere, Arlene Borner (NNPS Key Contact), and Lois Fiskness. Not pictured: Kristin Raymakers, Shelly Pouliot, Lori Juelich, Bev Diles and Carolyn Barinsky.

principals really know their school improvement goals, and it helps to link family and community involvement to the same goals that educators and students are striving to attain.

We also have seen results from special-topic workshops on grant writing and improving business partners. Some schools wrote successful proposals for funding partnership activities, and many schools increased the number and effectiveness of business partners after the workshops. For example, one school earned a \$15,000 grant from Best Buy to improve technology training and equipment.

Finally, schools have given more attention to the new immigrant families that have moved to our area. We have many more English Language Learners (ELL) in the district, and our schools are working to help these families feel welcome at the schools and be part of their children's school lives.

**ARLENE:** I have seen increasing ownership for partnerships at each building due to the collaboration of the PICs, the Action Teams for Partnerships, and the administrators, teachers, families, and community partners in every location. Importantly, the schools have increased the alignment of district, school, and parent involvement goals. Our district and the School Site Councils have specific goals for students. More and more, schools' plans for family and community involvement are linked to those goals. This is critical for sustaining partnerships in District 112,

because we are very goal-oriented.

Another result is an increase in the use of technology to communicate with more families. Now, most schools have active websites to share information with families and the public, along with their use of traditional communications.

**NNPS: Look ahead five years. What improvements do you want to see as your district and schools continue to strengthen their partnership programs?**

**NINA:** It is my dream that school, family, and community partnerships will be considered a "main dish" and not just "dessert" for school improvement. We can do this by continuing to closely align curricular goals and family involvement so that partnerships are understood as a real tool for increasing student learning and behavior.

**NNPS: Are your dreams realistic?**

**NINA:** I already see some connections of partnerships and curricular goals – even at the high school level. For example, business partners are now central in some advanced marketing classes and consumer education in high school. When partnership programs are clearly linked to students' education, they will be sustainable.

**ARLENE:** I would like to develop stronger connections between our Cultural Liaisons with the PICs in all schools. We have over 600 English Language Learners whose families speak over 40 languages. We need to improve the connections of paren-

tal involvement and these students' educational activities. I can imagine a Cultural Education Consultant working with our Community Education Office to help the PICs and the schools' action teams with their plans for family involvement.

**NNPS: Is that realistic?**

**ARLENE:** I think so. The district is seeking grants to support the education of the diverse students we serve. It would be a small step to increase attention to these students' families, while creating welcoming schools and involving all families in ways that support student learning.

**NNPS: Do you have any other comments that may help NNPS members?**

**NINA:** District leaders should stay active in NNPS. Even after 10 years, we still benefit from networking with the staff at Johns Hopkins. We also appreciate the national recognition that we receive by sharing our best practices with other districts and schools in NNPS.

**ARLENE:** Our district has learned to balance NNPS structures with elements that we need in our community. The way we see it, family involvement is not an exact science. It must be research-based, but still flexible. Networking in our district and with NNPS helps us organize our work on partnerships. ♦