

District Leaders' Actions Help School Teams Improve Their Plans and Practices

District-level leadership increases the success of schools' Action Teams for Partnership (ATPs). Studies show that when district leaders guide school-based ATPs, the quality of the schools' programs is higher (Epstein, Galindo, & Sheldon, 2011). UPDATE data from 2011 indicate that elementary, middle, and high schools in NNPS that are "nested" in districts that also are members of NNPS report stronger support for their partnership programs than do schools whose districts are not members of NNPS (Hutchins & Sheldon, 2012). The schools in NNPS districts report that their district leaders for partnerships provide technical assistance to the ATPs, meet with principals to discuss partnership programs, help schools evaluate their partnership programs, and offer other support more than do non-member districts.

NNPS asks district leaders for partnerships to fulfill two responsibilities. First, they should conduct district-level activities that affect their offices and district policy for partnership program development. Second, they should facilitate each school's ATP to work effectively with its students' families.

Both kinds of leadership—at the district level and with the schools—benefit from six leadership strategies (Epstein et al., 2009). Strong leaders: **Create Awareness, Align Program & Policy, Guide Learning & Program Development, Share Knowledge, Celebrate Milestones, and Document Progress & Evaluate Outcomes.** Below are a few examples from *Promising Partnership Practices 2012* of how districts in NNPS are implementing these strategies.

Create Awareness—Publicize Planned Activities.

Schools' ATPs are more likely to sustain their partnership programs if they have whole-staff buy-in and support. **Pasco School District** in Washington used a *Road Map to ATP Success* to help everyone—families, teachers, community members, and other schools—stay informed about their own school's plan, practices, and progress of family and community engagement. District Leaders for Partnerships provided a template and incentives to encourage all schools to design a visual road map to display the schedule of all family and community engagement activities in their One-Year Action Plans for Partnerships.

The district created a road map, too, based on the Yellow Brick Road to display the schedule of all district meetings, involvement activities, NNPS deadlines, and opportunities for networking. ATPs designed and displayed their maps so that everyone who visited their schools would "see" the partnership activities planned and completed.

Guide Learning and Program Development—Ensure Two-Way Communications of District Leaders and School Teams.

Seattle Public Schools in Washington increased two-way communications with the *FEAT Connections Newsletter*. The newsletter connected district leaders for partnerships with school-based Family Engagement Action Teams (FEATs). In addition to messages from the district leaders, the schools contributed articles on their best practices and photos of family

and community activities. Seattle's district leaders also conducted face-to-face meetings with schools' action teams to ensure that each FEAT has its partnership program components in place. Regular, two-way communications between districts and schools are critical for successful, sustainable partnership programs.

Align Programs and Policy and Guide Learning and Program Development—Include Arts Education in Every School.

By obtaining grants for art education, **Cuyahoga County's Universal Pre-Kindergarten Program**, coordinated by **Starting Point and Invest in Children** in Cleveland, Ohio, helped 27 preschools include the arts in their plans for family and community engagement. At a general Open House Night for all schools, parents and children were welcomed back to school and were taken on a free field trip to local art museums. Then, each school planned a public art project to add to their One-Year Action Plan for Partnerships. School projects included a children's art show, a themed mural for the school, mosaics, ceramics, quilts and other artistic works.

Celebrate Milestones and Share Knowledge

Schools in the **Bridgeport School District** in Connecticut used the *Team Spirit Celebration* to share best practices with other schools, parents, and the community. Last year, 33 schools set up displays of their most promising practices and brought 150 copies of an information sheet on the

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designed and tested structures, processes, and activities at all school levels to engage all families in ways that benefit students.

Recommendations

Across studies conducted over decades, researchers tended to list the same five major recommendations to increase the involvement of diverse families at school and at home. The recommendations also reflect NNPS guidelines for good partnership programs.

1. **Welcome all families.** Parents need to know that educators value and respect the work they do to care for and guide their children.
2. **Communicate in languages that parents understand.** This starts with clear English in messages and meetings with parents. This may require translators and interpreters to communicate with parents who speak their native tongue.
3. **Provide parents with useful and timely information** about school and district policies, programs for their children, and students' progress. Also, provide a contact person for parents to call if they have questions.
4. **Organize an intentional, well-planned partnership program** to engage all families in their children's education at school and/or at home in ways that help all students do their best in school.
5. **Incorporate student backgrounds and family cultures into the classroom curricula** and in the school's program of family and community involvement. Teachers may use family and community "funds of knowledge" and resources to enrich the curriculum and boost students' learning.

MetLife Foundation Grant

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be disseminated nationally. The 12-13 grant also will enable NNPS researchers to test, complete, and disseminate modules for professors of education to add the homework process to their courses for preservice teachers and future principals.

MetLife Foundation has a long-standing interest in improving programs of family and community engagement. This is a recurring topic on the annual *MetLife Survey of the American Teacher*. In 2011, one of the *Survey's* provocative findings was that teachers and parents in more collaborative schools (e.g., with high parental engagement) were happier and more optimistic about their students' futures than those in less collaborative schools. This has implications for teachers' and parents' expectations for students' success in school.

NNPS recognizes MetLife Foundation as an important partner for improving leadership, programs, and practices of school, family, and community partnerships.

By enacting these recommendations, any school can increase the participation of families who were not previously engaged in their children's education, create a sense of community, and respond to unique needs of families with diverse economic, racial, ethnic, and linguistic backgrounds.

¹ See Chapter 1 in Hutchins, et al. (2012) for references to over 50 studies on multicultural partnerships. Also see a discussion of challenges and strategies for engaging diverse families in Galindo & Pucino, 2012.

References

Galindo, C. & Pucino, A. (2012). Family diversity and school-family relationships. In Banks, J. (Ed.), *Encyclopedia of diversity in education* (pp. 885-889). New York: Sage

Leadership Line

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activity so that others could replicate or adapt it.

These are a few of more than a dozen actions by district leaders for partnerships that aim to facilitate the work of schools' ATPs. Read details of all activities for the six district leadership strategies in *Promising Partnership Practices* at www.partnershipschools.org in the section Success Stories.

Epstein, J. L., et al. (2009). *School, family, and community partnerships: Your handbook for action* (3rd Ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press.

Epstein, J. L., Galindo, C., & Sheldon, S. B. (2011). Levels of leadership: Effects of district and school leaders on the quality of school programs of family and community involvement. *Educational Administration Quarterly*, 47, 462-495.

Hutchins, D. J. & Sheldon, S. B. (2012). Summary 2011 School Data: Special Report. Baltimore, MD: National Network of Partnership Schools (NNPS) at Johns Hopkins University.

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Publications.

Hutchins, D. J., Greenfeld, M. D., Epstein, J. L., Sanders, M. G., & Galindo, C. (2012). *Multicultural partnerships: Involve all families*. New York: Eye on Education.

