

Collaborating for Change: How an Urban School District and a Community-Based Organization Support and Sustain School, Family, and Community Partnerships

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Background: Research suggests that schools' capacity to successfully implement and sustain reform programs may rest, in part, with district-level facilitation. The importance of district leadership has been established for a variety of educational reforms, including school, family, and community partnerships. However, few studies have been conducted to understand how successful district leaders implement and sustain school, family, and community partnerships as an educational reform.

Focus of Study: This case study seeks to fill this gap. It describes leadership strategies employed by the office of parent involvement in an urban school district in the United States. More specifically, this article focuses on the collaborative relationship between the office of parent involvement and a community-based parent involvement organization (CPIO).

Research Design: The study employed a multiple case study design, which included interviews with district, school, and parent leaders; observations of workshops, meetings, presentations, and other work-related activities of key district-level respondents; document collection and review; and school site visits.

Findings: Analyses suggest that the collaboration between the district's office of parent involvement and the CPIO has helped to support and sustain school, family, and community partnerships as a reform initiative for nearly a decade. The relationship has resulted in (1) complementary parent leadership training for school-based partnership teams, (2) joint

planning and implementation of districtwide partnership activities, and (3) community advocacy for district partnership personnel and resources.

Research suggests that schools' capacity to successfully implement and sustain reform programs may rest, in part, with district-level facilitation (Spillane & Thompson, 1997). The importance of district leadership has been established for a variety of educational reforms, including school, family, and community partnerships. However, few studies have been conducted to understand how successful district leaders implement and sustain partnerships as an educational reform. This case study seeks to fill this gap. It describes leadership strategies employed by the office of parent involvement in an urban school district in the United States. More specifically, this article focuses on the collaborative relationship between the office of parent involvement and a community-based parent involvement organization (CPIO). This relationship has helped the district to sustain its partnership reform efforts for nearly 10 years despite superintendent and other district personnel changes. This collaborative relationship can serve as a model for other districts seeking to implement and sustain programs of family and community engagement.

The article is divided into seven sections. After describing the relevant literature and the methods used in the study, the article discusses the case district's partnership program. The article then describes the origins and activities of the CPIO. Next, the article discusses how the district's collaboration with the CPIO has helped to support and sustain partnerships for nearly a decade, and then describes factors that have facilitated the collaboration. The concluding section discusses the implications of the study's findings for district leaders for school, family, and community partnerships.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

FAMILY AND COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT AS EDUCATIONAL REFORM

School, family, and community partnerships is a reform strategy that promotes collaboration among students, families, communities, and school leaders to achieve school excellence and student success. When families, schools, and communities work collaboratively, the following outcomes have been documented: (1) higher student achievement, (2) improved student behavior and attendance, and (3) more positive school climates (Henderson & Mapp, 2002).

Effective partnerships require that schools view parents and communities not simply as customers or clients but as partners in the educational process. This paradigm shift must occur at the school level and among key stakeholders at the individual level. Epstein (2001) captures the importance of both in her theory of overlapping spheres of influence. The external model of the theory shows three spheres representing the home, school, and community. These spheres can be pulled together or apart by factors such as the age of the child, the educational background of the parent, or the professional experiences of the teacher. When these spheres are pulled together, students benefit from the collaborative support provided by adults in their families, schools, and communities (Henderson & Mapp, 2002; Sanders, 1998). However, when these spheres are pulled apart, students are placed at greater risk for negative school outcomes. For successful overlap to occur, schools must create systemic structures and channels of communication that promote and sustain collaborative action. Epstein provides a framework of six types of involvement to help schools organize such action around important goals for students' learning.

The six types of involvement in Epstein's framework are:

- 1) Parenting—helping all families to understand child and adolescent development and to establish home environments that support children as students
- 2) Communicating—designing and conducting effective two-way communications about school programs and children's progress
- 3) Volunteering—recruiting and organizing help and support for school programs and student activities
- 4) Learning at home—providing information and ideas to families about how to help students at home with homework and curricular-related decisions and activities
- 5) Decision-making—including parents in school decisions and developing parent leaders
- 6) Collaborating with the community—identifying and integrating resources and services from the community to strengthen and support schools, students, and their families (Epstein et al., 2002)

When schools integrate activities that encompass these six types of

involvement in their educational programs, they also create opportunities for meaningful interaction among individuals in students' schools, families, and communities.

DISTRICT LEADERSHIP AND SCHOOL, FAMILY, AND COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIPS

Whether schools can develop effective programs of school, family, and community partnerships rests largely on teachers' and administrators' knowledge about partnerships and their capacity to work collaboratively with adults in students' families and communities (Epstein, 2001; Floden, Goertz, & O'Day, 1995). It also rests on the capacity of district educational leaders to support the efforts of school faculty and staff (Spillane & Thompson, 1997). According to McLaughlin (1992), districts have a facilitative role to play in building schools' individual and organizational capacity for reform. She argued that through the provision of direct support, the facilitation of ongoing dialogue and feedback about educational practice, and the celebration of professional commitment, engagement, and progress, district leaders can significantly influence the quality of school reform implementation.

When discussing the role of district support for school-based partnerships, Henderson, Mapp, Johnson, and Davies (2007) observed, "All schools are part of larger school district. What happens—or doesn't happen—at school depends a great deal on how much the district explicitly expects and supports family and community involvement" (p. 412).

Data from school-based partnership teams show a positive relationship between district support and the implementation and quality of schools' programs of family and community engagement (Sanders, Epstein, & Sheldon, 2005). Similarly, Epstein, Galindo, Sheldon, and Williams (2007) reported that district leadership and direct assistance to schools significantly influence the quality of schools' implementation of comprehensive partnership programs and outreach to diverse families.

The role of district leaders for school, family, and community partnerships is multifaceted and requires a variety of leadership skills. For example, when districts join the National Network of Partnership Schools (NNPS),¹ in addition to coordinating district-level partnership activities, they are guided to facilitate and support the development of school-level partnership programs. This may include activities such as leadership training workshops, small incentive grants, and end-of-year partnership celebrations. District facilitators also are guided to conduct regular meetings with school-based partnership teams that are responsible for planning, implementing, and evaluating school-level partnership programs

(Epstein et al., 2002). By successfully fulfilling these diverse tasks, district leaders increase the likelihood that schools are provided the assistance and resources necessary to prioritize family and community involvement in their school improvement efforts.

COMMUNITY BASED ORGANIZATIONS AND DISTRICT LEADERSHIP FOR PARTNERSHIPS

District leaders who can garner support from those within and outside the district may be most successful in implementing and scaling up (see Coburn, 2003) partnerships as a district reform. Indeed, Fullan, Bertani, and Quinn (2004) identified external support as a key component of sustained district-level reform. They stated:

All improving districts that we know about have external partners—such as business groups, foundations, community-based organizations or universities that build the district's professional capacity. . . . Well placed pressure from external partners, combined with internal energy, can be the stimulus for tackling something that might not otherwise be addressed, and district leaders can use these partners to stir the pot in purposeful directions. (p. 45)

In recent history, community-based organizations have become engaged in educational reform generally, and school, family, and community partnerships specifically. For example, some community-based groups, as “outside” organizations, have mobilized families and communities to “confront” educational bureaucracies and influence specific educational policies and practices (Su, 2005). This approach, which has its roots in the community control efforts of the late 1960s, often stems from communities' frustration with inadequate schools and unresponsive educational bureaucracies.

Although this approach has brought short-term attention and limited remedy to the educational plight of, most often, students in economically depressed communities, it has not resulted in significant educational reform over time. Warren (2005) observed,

However necessary this “outside” strategy may be. . . , it ultimately is insufficient for improving urban schools because such schools lack the capacity to change on their own. Moreover, combative strategies can exacerbate a situation in which school principals and teachers are already wary of outside community organizations and fear that these organizations will make unreasonable

demands and intrusions into the professional sphere of educators. (p. 4)

Other community-based groups have used a collaborative approach to help bridge the power gap between parents and schools, and assisted these parties in moving closer to a partnership model. Through parent organizing, leadership development, and the provision of direct support and information to families and children, these organizations have built families' capacity to work with individual schools to achieve common goals for their children and adolescents (Jasis & Ordonez-Jasis, 2004; Shirley, 1997). The success of such efforts largely depends on the willingness of schools to collaborate with families and community groups to achieve common goals. When such willingness exists, community groups have been successful in increasing family involvement and creating more effective and responsive schools as part of a broader goal of community development (Warren, 2005).

Although several studies describe the role of community organizations in promoting family engagement within individual schools (see Henderson & Mapp, 2002; Quezada, 2003), few have studied the relationship between such groups and district-level leaders and departments responsible for family and community involvement. However, the potential of collaboration between them to positively influence the implementation and institutionalization of school, family, and community partnerships on a broad scale is worthy of examination. This study focuses on one such collaboration.

METHODS

RESEARCH DESIGN

This study is part of an ongoing longitudinal qualitative study of district leadership for school, family, and community partnerships.² Districts participating in the study are members of the National Network of Partnership Schools. The study employs a multiple case study design, which includes phenomenological, semistructured, focus group, and informal interviews; observations of workshops, meetings, presentations, and other work-related activities of key district-level respondents; document collection and review; and site visits to participating schools within each district. Four districts are included in the study.³ Data collection in two of the four districts (Districts 1 and 2) began in August 2004. A third district (District 3) was added in 2005, and a fourth (District 4) was added in 2006.

Districts were initially selected for the study based on three criteria measured by responses on an annual NNPS evaluative survey, UPDATE: (1) level of district leadership, (2) length of membership in NNPS, and (3) level of school facilitation. Only district members who reported high levels of leadership (i.e., reported conducting 8 or more of the 13 leadership activities measured) in the 2003 UPDATE survey and who had been members of NNPS for 3 or more consecutive years were considered for the study because of their greater likelihood to yield useful insights. Selected districts varied on their reported levels of school facilitation in order for the researcher to examine if and how this activity related to the quality of schools' partnership programs. Final selection of case districts was conducted to ensure variation along key demographic characteristics such as location (i.e., rural, urban, suburban), size, and the socioeconomic and racial/ethnic makeup of the student population.

Although the broader goal of this multiyear, multicase study is to understand the role of district leaders in bringing school, family, and community partnerships to scale, data collection over time also has resulted in more focused studies of partnership program development. For example, research conducted in District 1 has generated a paper on how district leaders use data in partnership program development, and another on the role of parent liaisons in partnership program development. The present study highlights the collaborative relationship between the family involvement coordinator(s) in District 3 and the CPIO as a promising practice for other districts that seek to implement school, family, and community partnerships as a reform initiative.

SETTING AND DATA COLLECTION

Findings reported in this article are drawn from data gathered by the author in District 3 between 2005 and 2007. District 3 is an urban district in the northeast United States that serves a city of approximately 280,000 residents: 50% who are White/non-Hispanic, 38% who are Black/African American, 8% who are Latino/Hispanic, 1% who are Native American Indian, and 4% who identified with more than one or none of these racial/ethnic categories. The median income for residents in 2005 was \$27,000. The district has approximately 60 pre-K–12 schools that serve about 38,000 students. District 3 is struggling to raise students' test scores and graduation rates. As a member of NNPS, it has been implementing a comprehensive districtwide partnership program for nearly a decade.

Official data collection in District 3 began in August 2005. Data collection included observations of district-level partnership events, including

end-of-year planning and celebration meetings, as well as cluster meetings in which school-based partnership team members gather to learn more about research on partnerships, share promising practices, and plan partnership activities. Observations also were made of two CPIO events to better understand the content shared, as well as the numbers of participants attending.

Formal semistructured and informal interviews also were conducted. Two formal and several informal interviews were conducted with the CPIO director. Formal interviews also were conducted with a former CPIO officer and current member, and 3 CPIO members who responded to an e-mail request for interviews. Informal interviews were conducted with 4 randomly chosen parents attending CPIO and district cluster meetings. Between 2005 and 2007, in addition to informal conversations, four semistructured interviews were conducted with the district's parent involvement coordinator. Interviews also were conducted with the district's director of community relations and director of Title I, who supervised the coordinator's NNPS activities. Documents, including district and CPIO meeting agendas and minutes, flyers, and PowerPoint presentations; NNPS district and school membership forms and annual surveys; CPIO organizational bylaws; and newspaper articles also were examined (see Table 1). These multiple sources and types of data were needed to understand the goals, challenges, practices, and progress of the district's partnership program.

Table 1. Sources of Qualitative Data—District C

Semi-Structured/Informal Interviews	Observations	Document Review
• NNPS Key Contact/Parent Involvement Coordinator • Director of Community Relations • Director of Title I • CPIO officers • CPIO members	• Cluster Meetings • End-of-Year Celebrations • CPIO Meetings	• District website • Parent involvement forms, policies, meeting agendas, event brochures, PowerPoint presentations • Newspaper articles • NNPS survey and membership forms • School Promising Partnership Practices (district collection) • CPIO By-laws, minutes, meeting agendas

DATA ANALYSIS

Data analysis was an iterative process that began with data collection. Notes were made at the end of interviews and site visits. These notes included descriptions and impressions of the information shared or observed, which helped to shape subsequent site visits and interview questions. Data reported in this study were drawn from formal and informal interviews as discussed previously. All formal interviews were recorded and transcribed. They were then coded to identify recurring themes and concepts. Some codes, such as “district leadership,” “family involvement,” and “collaboration,” were created prior to the categorizing stage of data analysis based on the relevant literature and the study’s primary research questions. Other codes, such as “social networks” and “family outreach,” emerged from the process of reading and rereading the transcribed interviews.

Notes from observations and informal interviews, as well as documents collected for review, were similarly coded and filed based on content matter. Once coded, these data were reviewed and summarized in the form of tables, charts, and narrative text to capture and articulate emergent findings. Exploration of the literature on district leadership, reform implementation, and community engagement in education informed the data analysis process. Findings that resulted from this process are presented next, after a brief description of the case district and community-based organization.

THE CASE DISTRICT

The case district joined the National Network of Partnership Schools in 1999 as part of its districtwide improvement efforts. The district’s partnership program coordinator explained,

When . . . [the district] was going through their initial school improvement process, school teams trained with a specialist in school improvement. . . . There was one piece that was missing from the training—nowhere did it have a place for parents. How were parents and families going to help the school achieve their goals? We knew that if we were really going to make a difference we had to have the parents on board with us. So there was some research as to a strategy we could use for parent involvement and we settled on NNPS. (fall 2005)

Under the leadership of the district’s superintendent, widely described

as an “advocate for family engagement,” the district joined with a majority of its elementary schools and three district coordinators whose professional responsibilities were divided between Title I and the Office of Community Relations, which have alternately housed the district’s chapter of NNPS. The district coordinators received training to implement the NNPS partnership approach from the organization’s director and facilitators. After initial training, the coordinators regularly attended the NNPS annual leadership conference for additional professional development.

The district coordinators’ NNPS duties included providing guidance and support to school-based action teams, as well as conducting activities to create a climate for, and culture of, partnerships throughout the district. Accordingly, these coordinators conducted several activities throughout the school year, such as quarterly cluster meetings to provide support and guidance to school-based partnership teams; partnership project grants to fund school, family, and community partnership activities; end-of-year celebration meetings to provide school partnership teams with the time and opportunity to reflect on progress, celebrate accomplishments, and plan future initiatives; workshops to build families’ and educators’ capacity for partnerships; and a districtwide compilation of promising partnership practices to share among school teams and leaders. Coordinators also worked with school improvement teams to ensure the integration of partnership activities in their improvement plans and monitored the use of Title I funds allocated to buildings for parent leadership activities. The quality of these activities and the number of school members participating in the district’s chapter of NNPS increased each year. In recognition of these achievements, the district received an NNPS award of excellence.

However, in 2005, one of the district’s three family involvement coordinators retired. In 2006, a second coordinator retired. Budget constraints and a new superintendent slowed the pace of hiring new coordinators to continue the work that was done so effectively by the original staff. Despite this reduction in staff, the remaining coordinator continued to conduct cluster meetings and end-of-year celebrations, albeit at a significantly reduced level. She noted, “Before, one third of the building teams were mine. I would work with the action teams from those buildings . . . now they’re all mine. I can’t give the same level of support as before” (spring 2006).

The coordinator’s experience is not unique. Several NNPS districts have experienced reductions in staff and resources committed to family and community involvement. Sustaining partnership reform efforts despite such reductions and obtaining the resources needed to ade-

quately fund partnership activities and outreach have thus become critical tasks for these district leaders. In District 3, these tasks have been addressed collaboratively by the district coordinator under the supervision of the Directors of the Office of Community Relations and Title I, and the CPIO. Together, they have worked to keep partnerships a central focus of the district's improvement efforts.

THE CPIO

The CPIO began as a loose connection of parent leaders in the district. These parents did not constitute a formal body, although they met informally to discuss educational issues and concerns and would sometimes work collectively to raise these issues at school board meetings. However, their influence was limited. The CPIO director explained,

We didn't have a dialogue on a regular basis with the school district. It was always when there was a crisis. . . . We would be called to put out fires. We grew very quickly to resent that relationship because we understood that we needed to have an active role on a regular and daily basis. We were no longer willing for the district to call us together to put out its fires. We really wanted parents across the district to be able to send their kids to schools of excellence. That was not the reality. It was not a possibility because parents were largely disengaged. We were largely shut out. It was a, "You bring us your kids and disappear" attitude. Well, a lot of us weren't interested in bringing our kids and disappearing. We knew the district had some real serious challenges and we wanted to address those challenges. We also knew it was important for youngsters that we address those challenges in a meaningful manner as quickly as possible. (fall 2005)

The CPIO is now a formal organization whose charter states that its primary purposes are (1) to ensure that a partnership is created with the school district, and (2) to monitor the implementation of the board of education's parent involvement policy. The organization also has been actively involved in board of education elections, having endorsed two of the three candidates elected to parent-eligible seats, and the selection of the new district superintendent.

The CPIO is an ethnically diverse organization primarily funded by Title I monies allocated to the district. As required in its bylaws, the organization is made up of parent leaders from each school in the district. The CPIO conducted a variety of activities that provided participants with

information on state standards, family and community involvement, school leadership, and educational terminology. These activities included monthly meetings in which Epstein's framework of six types of involvement were reviewed, and schools were selected to present "promising practices" corresponding to one or more of these types of involvement. Monthly meetings also included updates from the district's program coordinator for family and community involvement, and the superintendent or a designee. When describing the importance of these monthly meetings, one parent member, Cynthia, stated, "By me being involved in CPIO, there's usually a speaker, something, that's presented in the meeting. So I get a chance to find out who is who within the district so if I have a problem, I know exactly where to go" (spring 2006).

The CPIO also sponsored parent retreats, academies, and workshops that focused on leadership for family and community involvement, and other topics generated by CPIO members, such as teen parenting and the district's 2006 literacy and mathematics goals for students. Observation of, and participation in, one 2-day retreat on school, family, and community partnerships attended by approximately 70 CPIO members showed an enthusiastic and engaged audience who readily shared information and asked questions. Likewise, the CPIO member turnout at the board of education meeting where the superintendent presented the district's school budget reached approximately 30 family representatives.

In addition, the CPIO sponsored a book club. Books on selected educational topics were read and discussed by the group. In fall 2005, approximately 30 CPIO members participated in a group discussion of the book, *Achievement Matters: Getting Your Child the Best Education Possible* (Price, 2003). The following selection was *Professional Learning Communities at Work: Best Practices for Enhancing Student Achievement* (DuFour & Eaker, 1998).

Beyond providing parents with information, the CPIO also provided its members with expanded social networks. CPIO parent member Linda described such networking opportunities as a reason for her initial and continued participation in the organization. She explained,

I thought, here's this great entity with the ideal of pulling together groups from all the PTOs, PTAs, Home-N-Schools, whatever it is, you're pulling together these different individuals for leadership. I saw it as a great networking opportunity. "This is what I am doing that's really good if you want to take this up."
 "This is what I'm having problems with. . ." (spring 2006)

Both parent members and officers stated that the CPIO had areas for

improvement, including reaching more families, identifying topics of greatest relevance and interest for its members, and devising strategies to hold building administrators accountable for their schools' partnership efforts. Yet, there was general agreement that the organization played a key role in the district's reform efforts. There also was optimism about the future of the organization and the school district as a whole.

COLLABORATIVE INTERACTION

The director of community relations and the director of Title I described the collaborative relationship between district partnership leaders and the CPIO as critically important to the district's parent involvement efforts and successes over time. The community relations director stated, "The district has benefited from having different sectors working to achieve a common goal" (fall 2007). Data collected during the study suggest that the collaborative relationship between district leaders and the CPIO has supported partnership reform in the following, often overlapping, ways: (1) complementary parent leadership training for school-based action teams for partnerships (ATPs); (2) joint planning and implementation of districtwide partnership activities; and (3) community advocacy for district partnership personnel and resources

Each of these is described next.

COMPLEMENTARY PARENT TRAINING FOR ATPS

When the district joined NNPS, the CPIO director and two members attended the NNPS annual leadership development conference with the then three-parent involvement coordinators. The CPIO sent members to the NNPS conference several years thereafter to create broad understanding of the key NNPS principles: (1) collaborative leadership and a team approach to partnership program development and design; (2) a broad definition of parent and community involvement based on Epstein's framework of six types of involvement; and (3) a goal-oriented, research-driven approach to partnerships. Coburn (2003) argued that such "spread" is an essential dimension of scaling up educational reforms. She stated that scaling up must involve more than the spread of activities, structures, and materials, but "must also involve the spread of underlying beliefs, norms, and principles" (p. 8) of the reform.

The CPIO leaders and members attending the NNPS leadership development conference spread knowledge of, and comfort with, these principles throughout the organization through its various activities, such as monthly meetings, retreats, and parent academies. CPIO members in

turn shared this knowledge with others in their school buildings and on their partnership teams and other school-based parent organizations. The following interview exchange with a CPIO member illustrates how such sharing occurred.

BARBARA: I find that with each [CPIO] meeting I go to, there is always something new, some new insight, something that people should be aware of, and I am hoping that as members we can turn around and communicate it to other parents who can't be there. . .

INTERVIEWER: Have you found yourself sharing the information?

BARBARA: Yes, like this meeting [board of education meeting focused on school budget], I wanted my son's school to know about it, so I made a flyer and asked, "Will you pass them out to parents?" And they said, "Oh sure," and they did it. They copied it and got it out to the parents and that was fantastic. That is a great example of the best way that the parents and schools can work together to get information out and help the parents be involved. (spring 2006)

The parent coordinator described the impact of CPIO members on school partnership teams in the following way:

I have found that parents that attend CPIO meetings are joining partnership teams in their buildings, which has been strongly encouraged. . . . [The CPIO] also has really embraced the best practice concept, and that sharing best practice is good. At the [CPIO] meetings, they talk very knowledgeably about best practices and activities that they either initiated or were very supportive of that were helping the schools reach their school improvement goals—their goals for reading and math. . . (fall 2005)

Prior to 2006, when district coordinators conducted quarterly cluster meetings for schools' partnership teams, CPIO activities complemented these meetings and provided parent leaders with additional support to be effective team members. However, the significance of CPIO activities for parent leaders in the district became even more pronounced when the district lost two of its three family involvement coordinators, and district-level support for partnership teams waned. The CPIO became a site where parent leaders could find information and strategies to keep their

schools focused on partnerships for school improvement, as Linda described: “The CPIO and district’s work with NNPS has brought the dialogue out and allowed parents to have the words to voice their expectations about partnerships. . . . So the real positive thing is that if your school isn’t open, you’ve got the knowledge to ask the right questions to promote change” (spring 2006).

JOINT PLANNING AND IMPLEMENTATION OF DISTRICTWIDE PARTNERSHIP ACTIVITIES

The district family coordinator and CPIO also have worked collaboratively to plan and implement several districtwide partnership activities. Below, the family involvement coordinator described how their collaborative efforts influenced school-based partnership activities throughout the district. She stated,

[The CPIO] has been very, very supportive in building school, family, and community partnerships in the district. . . . For example, we started a big campaign 3 years ago about starting the school year off right and welcoming parents with first-week activities. . . . It took us about 3 years before we really got schools to turn in plans before the first day of school outlining what they were going to do to make parents and families feel welcome in their buildings that first week. But we worked at it. We kept at it. It started small with just a few schools. But the [CPIO] was relentless about it; they wanted it. We kept working at it until it finally got to the point where it became mandatory, that every building needed to do something. (winter 2006)

Under the direction of the Title I office, the family involvement coordinator also worked with three CPIO leaders, along with other school and district leaders, to plan and implement a districtwide conference for families that was held in spring 2007. The conference was requested by the new superintendent, who identified “meaningful family and community involvement and community collaboration” as one of the six principles of his reform plan for the system. Hundreds of parents attended the conference, which featured a nationally known keynote speaker and workshops on family involvement to improve student achievement. When discussing the unique role played by the CPIO representatives, the district coordinator observed, “The CPIO members have been great to work with. They have kept parents’ needs and concerns at the center of our planning” (summer 2007).

The CPIO members also worked with the family involvement coordinator, Title I director, and other parent leaders to develop a road map for parent involvement in the district. The committee produced a report recommending areas for improvement, including establishing an office of parent involvement, hiring a director for that office, and funding a parent liaison position for each school (including high schools, which heretofore have not been formally involved in the district's partnership efforts) in the district. The committee presented the report to the superintendent in July 2007. Thus, by working collaboratively, district leaders and the CPIO have been able to implement partnership activities on a broad level despite significant budget, resource, and leadership changes in the district.

COMMUNITY ADVOCACY FOR DISTRICT PARTNERSHIP PERSONNEL AND RESOURCES

The CPIO also has supported partnerships in the case district by acting as an advocate for continued and improved implementation of the NNPS approach. Since its inception, the CPIO has met monthly with the superintendent to discuss its concerns and needs, and has been central in keeping family and community involvement a top priority in the district. Past and present superintendents have been included in CPIO monthly meetings to promote communication between the school system's chief executive officer and parent leaders.

CPIO DIRECTOR: The superintendent just got here. . . . He understands the necessity of parent involvement much the same as [the former superintendent], so we didn't miss a beat. As a matter of fact, he has been a lot more active in the "superintendent update" section of our meetings because the former superintendent had to travel a great deal. To date, this superintendent has done every update himself. (spring 2006)

These meetings, which are also regularly attended by the family coordinator, the director of the Office of Community Relations, the director of Title I, and one or more of the district's three community superintendents, have become a central forum for dialogue and information sharing in the district.

Since 2006, as described by the CPIO director, the organization has "harassed" the district to fill the vacant family involvement coordinator positions. This advocacy has supported the efforts of the remaining coordinator and her supervisors to have additional coordinators hired, efforts

that included a presentation to the superintendent and the school board outlining the history and current needs of the district's chapter of NNPS. It is not clear whether the CPIO's advocacy influenced the superintendent and school board's decision regarding the coordinator positions. However, in the spring of 2007, a new coordinator was hired, and the third coordinator position was filled in the summer of that year.

FACILITATING FACTORS

Relational power is the power to achieve goals through collective action, in contrast to unilateral power, or achieving goals by exerting dominance over others (see Warren, 2005, p. 4). Relational power comes from understanding the organizations or people with whom one seeks to work, and acting as an equal partner in efforts to address critical issues. One factor that appears to have made collaboration possible in the case district is the choice made by key leaders to use relational power. Although this article focuses primarily on the family involvement coordinator's relationship with the CPIO, the director of community relations, the Title I director, and the superintendent also were significantly involved in the collaboration. They attended CPIO events and invited CPIO members to serve on a variety of district decision-making committees.

These district leaders recognized the important role played by the CPIO, and Beth, a former officer and current member of the CPIO, commented that support from the district partnership coordinators and the superintendent was the CPIO's "greatest strength" (spring 2006). Thus, the relational approach to partnerships in the district has developed, evolved, and become infused in the district's culture as the benefits of this approach for all parties have crystallized. As a result, the newly hired coordinators and the newly elected CPIO director have inherited this approach and the expectation of its continuation, just as the superintendent inherited the expectation that family and community involvement would remain a district priority.

Moreover, the collaboration between the CPIO and the district office of parent and community involvement has arguably been aided by NNPS, another external partner. NNPS offered a conceptual framework, vocabulary, and core principles around which district and CPIO leaders could agree, thus providing a foundation for communication and collaboration that the CPIO and district coordinators seized and nurtured. NNPS also provided tools, information, and professional development opportunities that helped the CPIO to minimize the knowledge gap between educators and family and community members. By reducing this gap, power

differentials that can create barriers to partnerships (see Fine, 1993) also have been reduced. Indeed, many CPIO members find themselves possessing information and insights not fully understood by formal educators.

One young woman who joined the CPIO expressed frustration with “people who tell you they don’t know and they’re educators.” The CPIO director explained,

You will learn very quickly that there is so much to know . . . no one can know it all. . . . Our role is to be collaborative because the schools are only as good as we insist that they are. If we don’t insist that the schools be beacons of excellence, then they deteriorate to mediocrity very quickly. (fall 2005)

The collaborative approach that has been embraced by the CPIO and the district’s partnership leaders serves as a model for other districts seeking to improve parent and community involvement and to bridge the power divides that relegate many families to the periphery of school, family, and community partnerships.

CONCLUSION

Family and community involvement, despite increasing acceptance and popularity as an important school reform strategy, is not without challenges. Common norms of public schooling (i.e., autonomy, order, and control) continue to create barriers to meaningful family and community engagement. Furthermore, shrinking federal, state, and local resources and increasing emphasis on high-stakes testing have converged to limit the district resources available to scale up partnerships and support their successful implementation.

Nevertheless, schools and districts in the United States continue to make progress. In the case district, this progress has been facilitated by the collaborative relationship between the district’s family involvement office and a community-based organization that has acted as an advocate for the district’s continued implementation of the NNPS partnership reform. The collaboration between the office of family and community involvement and the CPIO has helped the district to sustain implementation of the NNPS reform strategy for nearly a decade.

Community-based organizations often find themselves in opposition to formal educational bureaucracies within a district and embroiled in short- and long-term battles to make a difference in the education of children and youth. Within the case district, however, the relationship

between the CPIO and the office of parent and community involvement is a collaborative and productive one that has allowed each organization to realize its separate and overlapping objectives.

Notes

1. NNPS was established in 1996 to provide schools, districts, and states with research-based guidelines and tools to develop goal-focused programs of school, family, and community partnerships.

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3. Actual names of districts and individuals involved in the study are not used to ensure participant anonymity and confidentiality.

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