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CSR Briefs

Comprehensive School Reform Demonstration Program: The Importance of Parents and the Community

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The Comprehensive School Reform Demonstration (CSR) program increases the opportunity for strengthening partnerships between school staff, parents and communities. This brief will examine parent and community involvement, one of the components schools must address in selecting a CSR model.

Parent and Community Involvement

The need to build family and community partnerships has emerged as a major challenge in public education. Research has shown that partnerships with families are essential if students are to achieve their maximum potential. Schools realize that the job of educating students cannot be achieved alone; if students are going to be successful, a collaborative effort of schools, families and the community must be forged.

While parent and community involvement has always been critical for schools, that involvement has usually been directed and guided by the schools. The CSR legislation provides an opportunity to expand parent involvement to include parents and the community in the planning and implementation of school reform efforts. The CSR component related to parents/community that must be addressed in a school reform program is:

“The program provides for the meaningful involvement of parents and the local community in planning and implementing school improvement activities.”

Many of the CSR models include parent involvement, however few models provide a full range of involvement opportunities for parents and the community in school improvement activities. If the model a school selects does not address parent and community involvement in school improvement efforts, it will be necessary to adapt the model

selected to include this component. The involvement of parents in school improvement activities should not be new to schools. Many schools have addressed this involvement in their Title I and other federal programs. Title I requires that a jointly developed school policy describe how parents are involved in the planning, review and improvement of Title I or schoolwide programs. Reviewing and expanding this policy would enable schools to address the CSR component.

Parents, Communities and School Reform

All too often parents and communities are the last ones, if at all, to be included in discussions about school reform efforts. Schools in general tend to be exclusive rather than inclusive in planning discussions and decisions about school

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reform, often feeling that parents and community members have little to contribute. More than thirty years

of research has shown that when families and communities are involved in education, students learn more and schools improve. The research of Joyce Epstein can provide a foundation and framework to support schools in their efforts to involve parents/communities in comprehensive school reform programs (Epstein, 1995). Two of the six types of parent involvement documented in the Epstein research that support involving parents and communities in reform efforts include:

- Decision-making; “including parents in school decisions, developing parent leaders and representatives” and;
- Collaborating with Community; “identify and integrate resources and services from the community to strengthen school programs, family practices, and student learning and development.”

As expected, there are challenges associated with involving parents/communities in decision making, however the benefits of this involvement can be tremendous. Fostering an environment and an atmosphere of building shared ownership and shared responsibility is part of the answer to increasing student achievement, the goal of CSR. Creating a public engagement process about comprehensive school reform is an essential first step. Long-term support and a collaborative process with parents and communities must be nurtured in order to increase the capacity for long term change. The challenge is not necessarily parent/community involvement, but building an effective collaborative process that is representative of the school population.

Strategies to Involve Parents and Communities

The involvement of parents and communities is not new for schools. Assessing current forms of parent involvement in a school is one way to begin. Most schools have some form of parent involvement such as PTA/PTO, Title I or Bilingual Parent Councils. Parents should also have been included on Title I schoolwide committees and school based management teams. Schools should not start from scratch, but rather build on and expand existing structures. While there is no single way to form partnerships with families and communities in our schools, the CSR effort provides an opportunity to examine the entire process of how families and communities are currently involved. Partnerships with families and communities require a vision, policy and framework. In developing partnerships there are key fundamentals to keep in mind:

- Parent/community partnerships are a process, not a series of activities. Partnerships take time to succeed;

- Involve all stakeholders in the planning stage;
- Parent/Community partnerships should not be viewed as an “extra,” but everyone’s job and responsibility.
- Recognition of diverse populations, family and community structures, circumstances and responsibilities, including differences that might impede participation, is an important part of planning;
- Professional development opportunities for both staff and families are necessary; and
- Evaluating and monitoring progress and effectiveness is critical.

Unfortunately educational opportunities and traditional experiences have not prepared school staff or families for these new roles (Witherspoon and Gary, 1996). However, there are many resources, organizations and materials that can help schools and communities succeed. Taking advantage of these resources will increase the success of CSR models and school reform efforts.

References

- Epstein, J. (1995). *School/Family/Community Partnerships: Caring for the Children We Share*. *Phi Delta Kappan*, 76(9).
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About CSR Briefs

CSR Briefs is an occasional series of articles highlighting key issues related to the implementation of the Comprehensive School Reform Demonstration Program. Additional articles include:

- Comprehensive School Reform and CSRD
- Readiness for CSRD
- How Well Do Models Meet the Requirements of the Comprehensive School Reform Demonstration Program
- Integrating Comprehensive School Reform Demonstration Program into Data-Driven School Improvement
- The Right Fit: Finding a CSRD Model to Meet School Needs

About the Region III Comprehensive Center

The Region III Comprehensive Center defines its mission as follows: *to provide high quality technical assistance and services to states, districts, and schools to facilitate the success of comprehensive education reform and school improvement initiatives.* The most important service delivery objective of the Center is to support continuous comprehensive school improvement. The Center has chosen to proactively focus its work with clients around continuous comprehensive school improvement in three areas:

- using data to improve educational decision-making;
- improving reading instruction; and
- increasing meaningful opportunities for parents to become involved in the education of their children.

One of 15 federally funded centers, the Region III Comprehensive Center serves Delaware, the District of Columbia, Maryland, New Jersey, Ohio and Pennsylvania. Technical assistance services are designed to improve educational programs that benefit all children, with an emphasis on districts and schools with a high percentage of children in poverty. In order to provide our clients with practical tools to promote continuous school improvement, the Center maintains staff expertise around five knowledge bases:

1. school reform and improvement;
2. standards and assessments;
3. teaching and learning;
4. parent involvement; and
5. safe and drug-free learning environments.

The Region III Comprehensive Center is operated by the George Washington University Center for Equity and Excellence in Education in partnership with RMC Research Corporation, Research for Better Schools, and ESCORT, State University New York at Oneonta.

We invite you to visit our web site:

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