



# Family & Community Engagement Committee Report

Spring 2012

## COMMITTEE MEMBERS

Natalie Olsen (Fox Meadow Elementary) – Co-Chairperson  
Madeleine Villalobos (Bartlett Elementary) – Co-Chairperson  
Laurel Bault (Washington Elementary)  
Paula Becker (Elgin High School)  
Debbie Caruso (Glenbrook Elementary)  
Douglas Edgar (Kimball Middle School)  
Kristie Guiney (South Elgin High School)  
Tracy Kelly (Sunnydale Elementary)  
Sandy Martin (Centennial Elementary)

## DISTRICT LIAISON

Karen Fox (Chief of Family & Community Engagement)

*Approved by CAC Executive Committee – March 22, 2012*

*Approved by CAC General Council – April 12, 2012*

*Presented to the Board of Education – May 21, 2012*

## **CORE BELIEFS NEEDED FOR SUCCESSFUL ENGAGEMENT**

*All parents have dreams for their children and want the best for them.*

*All parents have the capacity to support their children's learning.*

*Parents and school staff should be equal partners.*

*The responsibility for building partnerships between school and home rests primarily with school staff, especially school leaders.*

***From "Beyond the Bake Sale"***

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

The CAC Family & Community Engagement Committee would like to thank Karen Fox, U-46 Chief of Family and Community Engagement, for her support and collaboration over the past four years. This relationship has embodied engagement: district officials and community stakeholders working together – engaging – on the development of engagement practices. We appreciate being able to shape what engagement looks like in U-46 and we look forward to continuing our work. The committee would also like to thank Karla Guzman and Lynne Huske for their help this year.

## **COMMITTEE MISSION & INITIATIVES FOR 2011-2012**

The CAC Parent & Community Engagement Committee is dedicated to strengthening family and community participation in the improvement of student achievement at the school and district levels. Our goals for the current year:

- *Review the implementation of family and community engagement initiatives at U-46 schools.*
- *Recommend ways to improve customer service – how U-46 serves its learning community.*
- *Develop ideas for equipping and empowering parents as leaders.*
- *Continue to build a resource bank of engagement ideas from other school districts, national experts on engagement (case studies, research) and successful programs at U-46 schools.*

## **SUMMARY OF COMMITTEE WORK**

For its fourth year of work, the Family and Community Engagement Committee turned its attention to assessing where engagement is at in U-46 and on developing resources to help schools implement effective engagement strategies according to the U-46 Six Components of Engagement.

## **ASSESSMENT OF ENGAGEMENT IN U-46 – WHERE ARE WE?**

The first three years of committee work focused on defining what engagement should look like in U-46 and developing resources to explain this vision and scope of work. This year, the committee wanted to see what progress schools had made in implementing engagement strategies and assess what impact the committee’s work has had on this process. Key questions addressed were:

- How are principals being evaluated on Destination 2015 Engagement goals?
- How many schools currently have school-specific engagement plans?
- What component areas need the most attention?
- Which schools need the most support?
- What ongoing resources are needed to support principals and schools?
- Where does U-46 stand on a national level with engagement?

### **Destination 2015 and Family Engagement Survey**

Destination 2015 and the family engagement survey have greatly increased awareness of the importance of family engagement among schools and helped put focus on the committee’s work.

Destination 2015 sets the benchmark for positive remarks regarding engagement (“strongly agrees” and “agrees” combined) at 95% in year 2015. In the spring of 2011 the engagement survey – which was developed in conjunction with the CAC FACE Committee – showed a 69% positive response; fall 2011 results climbed to 84%. More than 5,800 surveys were returned this year, up from 2,600 in spring 2011. Many of the schools with a high response rate reported that they heavily promoted the survey; for example, ConnectEd messages, written correspondence, teacher communication at parent-teacher conferences, and providing paper surveys and computer access available, especially during conference time.

Destination 2015 defines family engagement as “the extent to which a parent or family member: 1) feels welcome at the schools, 2) reports evidence of effective communication with schools, 3) reports that they are provided with opportunities and information to support their children’s learning, 4) reports that the district/schools have effective process to address concerns, 5) reports opportunities for leadership and active participation with district and/or school, and 6) reports involvement/active partnerships with the district and school staff. (Areas of measurement are based on the U-46 Six Components of Family and Community Engagement and the National PTA Standards. The Components as well as the Engagement Survey questions are the combined work of the Family & Community Engagement Committee and the U-46 Office of Family & Community Engagement.)

Principals received survey results for their individual schools in December 2011. Survey questions relate directly to the U-46 Six Components of Engagement, which helps the district (and schools) assess progress on the Destination 2015 engagement goals. Survey data provides valuable insight into which engagement components schools need to focus more attention on; it also identifies the schools that are successfully engaging their learning communities and can serve as models of best practices. The committee was excited to learn that many school principals contacted Karen Fox once they received their survey results and wanted to know what they could do to improve family engagement at their schools.

Survey results identified components #4 – “Increasing Opportunities & Advocating for All Students” and #5 – “Sharing Decision-making with Stakeholders” as the two of the three areas that schools need the most support in developing. The committee is addressing these two areas in its work noted below under Equipping Parents as Leaders; the committee will continue to develop additional resources in these two areas.

### **Principal Assessment**

Principals are specifically directed by Board Policy to be the leading force behind engagement implementation at their schools; they are required to have an engagement plan in place. The committee wanted to know how principals are being held accountable for this directive, especially in light of the Destination 2015 benchmarks.

In October 2011, the committee met with Dr. Carmen Rodriguez, Assistant Superintendent of Elementary Education, and Mr. Greg Walker, Assistant Superintendent of Secondary Education, to talk about how they are assessing the principals on these goals.

**Elementary.** Up until this year, reporting on family engagement has been an indirect goal for the elementary principals. Beginning with the current 2011-2012 school year, it is a primary goal for elementary principals to show evidence that they have implemented family engagement strategies; all school principals will be evaluated on their engagement efforts this year. Carmen Rodriguez has been meeting one-on-one with all principals and reviewing the Destination 2015 goals and survey results, including the school-specific data on family engagement. They then discuss what specific areas of engagement need to be addressed at the school.

**Secondary.** Family engagement implementation is not a primary goal for all secondary schools, according to Greg Walker. Typically, principals are charged with 3-4 primary goals each year, and depending on the needs of a particular school, engagement may or may not be one of the primary goals. Goals are driven by Destination 2015. Overall, Walker said, administration is looking at how to embed family and community engagement in all initiatives. In middle and high schools, family engagement looks different than in elementary schools. Parents are no longer coming into classrooms to volunteer and school events are targeted to particular groups

or are sporting events rather than school-wide activities. Additionally, there are more families to engage, a broader span of communities to include and more points of contact (guidance, coaches, deans, teachers, etc.) at the schools, so connecting the entire community requires in-depth planning and coordination.

#### **Ongoing Work:**

- *Continue to monitor survey results to identify (1) best practices and (2) schools that might benefit from committee assistance.*
- *Review School Improvement Plans (SIPs) to identify engagement strategies that are being developed and implemented. This will give us a clearer picture of where individual schools are in the process.*
- *Develop additional resources for Components #4 and #5*
- *Follow-up with assistant superintendents on principal reviews.*
- *Discuss whether the survey response rate should also be viewed as an indicator of engagement success. With the other benchmarks, we have specific data on the academic performance of our students, not just a sampling of them. The engagement survey is a sampling at this point. Do 10%-20% speak for the whole?*

## **CUSTOMER SERVICE – HOW U-46 SERVES ITS LEARNING COMMUNITY**

To be truly effective in engaging the community it serves, it's imperative that the school district develop expectations, guidelines and resources on how to positively interact with families and community members. This is especially important when there are concerns or issues to be resolved.

CAC is a common destination for people with concerns, so effective problem-solving has been a priority of the committee for several years. When someone has a problem, it is very common to hear that they did not know how to go about getting help or they didn't know who to turn to next if their issue was not being resolved. Furthermore, their experiences in trying to resolve problems can vary – ranging from very positive to downright confusing or frustrating.

When families and students feel they have been heard and acknowledged regarding their concerns, questions or suggestions, they will be more willing to work with teachers and/or administrators toward a resolution or common goal (Engagement Components 1, 2, 5). On the flip side, when families and students feel they are not being heard or there is a delayed response – or no response – relationships and U-46's reputation suffer.

For this reason, the committee felt it was important that the district put into place consistent processes that promote effective problem-solving.

## **“U-46 Guidelines for Addressing Concerns, Questions and Suggestions”**

Once discussions began on developing problem-solving procedures, the committee learned that the district did, in fact, have a “communications protocol” document in draft form, outlining the “proper channels” for addressing concerns. Following a discussion earlier in the year by the Superintendent’s Staff about the need to better explain U-46’s procedures for communicating, Karen Fox began combining information from various locations (U-46 Parents website, some school handbooks, and “Welcome to the Board of Education Meeting” brochure).

The information, however, was not being used and/or promoted at schools and was not easily accessible to families on the district website (nor on school websites). So the information was in existence but not in use. The goal of the document – “Guidelines for Addressing Concerns, Questions and Suggestions” – is to outline the steps parents/guardians should take if they have a question or an issue that needs to be resolved and includes separate processes for elementary, middle and high schools.

As a result of the subcommittee’s interest, we were invited to assist with the development and review of the document. Karen Fox updated the document, seeking input from school administrators and the subcommittee. The committee researched problem-solving initiatives at other school districts and provided Karen Fox with suggestions for updating the document, including:

- Changing the name from “Communications Guidelines” to “Guidelines for Addressing Concerns, Questions and Suggestions;” the committee felt it was important to acknowledge that people are looking for help in solving problems/concerns.
- Changing the wording “protocol” to “procedure” to be more user-friendly.
- Helping to clarify what a “reasonable amount of time” is in regards to when one could expect return communication; this included the clarification that a “response” is not the same as a resolution of the problem (which might take longer); we feel it is important that parents/callers receive an acknowledgement that their concern/question was received and that someone would be handling their concern. We additionally recommend that the following wording be added to this section of the Guidelines:  
*“Depending on the nature of the issue, concern or question, the time it will take for full resolution will vary.”*
- Adding information about what the Board of Education does.
- Including tips on how to use the document.
- Providing suggestions for Frequently Asked Questions (ongoing).

Karen Fox also received feedback from several elementary and secondary staff members to ensure that the process made sense. The document will initially be posted on the U-46.org website by May of this year; it can be accessed on the Parents Web Site, found under the Parent Resources tab on the home page. Schools can also customize the document (with

specific contact information at the different levels) for use on their individual school websites. This document may be updated based on feedback from families and staff.

### **Ongoing Work**

- *The committee will continue to work on a communication plan for promoting the “Guidelines for Addressing Concerns, Questions & Suggestions” document to families and schools (see Recommendations).*
- *The committee will review and provide feedback on "rights and responsibilities" guidelines on how families and staff should conduct themselves and how they should expect to be treated when addressing concerns.*
- *The committee will continue to look into ways that schools and the district can track/follow-up on concerns or issues that have been raised: What was the outcome? How long does each point in the process take? Is this an isolated incident or is there a broader issue that needs to be addressed?*
- *The committee will continue to research ways to help facilitate effective problem-solving: tips for effective communication, training opportunities, additional resources.*
- *The committee will continue to look at customer service initiatives that can be used throughout the district or ways to improve existing processes.*

**Subcommittee Members:** Debbie Caruso, Kristie Guiney, Natalie Olsen

### **EQUIPPING PARENTS AS LEADERS**

A key goal for the committee this year was to develop ideas on how to empower and equip parents and community members as advocates for their students and as effective leaders in U-46. The committee recognizes the U-46 Parent Leadership Institute program as a positive step toward building new leadership within the U-46 community. But the committee also believes there needs to be multiple opportunities for building leaders if we want to fully engage our diverse learning community. A subcommittee was charged with the looking at the following:

- How do we equip your average parent to become an education advocate for children in the classroom, the school, the district, the state, the nation? We first need to educate them. How?
- Leadership Institute: How do we bring components of the Institute to CAC to expand leadership skills of our current leaders? To school-based parent organizations?
- How do we expand learning opportunities for current parent leaders (those who want to take a more active role at a district/state/national level)? What training and resources are available?

Our research into tools for equipping more parents with leadership skills led us to a report *Successful Community Organizing for School Reform*.

Community organizing is defined in this report as *“building power for people who are powerless and whose lives are negatively impacted by the decisions of others.”* The subcommittee wondered if this describes the average parent in U-46 or if it describes even a single parent or community member within the U-46 community? The Cross City Campaign (the campaign noted in the report) believed in the importance of organized parents and community in a school improvement process, but recognized the need to make a persuasive case for the impact of this kind of involvement. To make their case, a meeting was set up to build connections between parent leader organizers and community stakeholders and funders. The result of their meeting was that “community organizing is essential to initiate, develop and sustain long-term, dynamic school reform.”

Therefore, our subcommittee proposed that we convene the same sort of meeting with the goal of bringing community organizing to U-46 to help answer the above questions more clearly as well as the question below:

**What is community organizing and how can it better equip the U-46 parents with the leadership skills needed to develop and sustain long-term dynamic school / community improvement?**

The committee is working on organizing such a meeting in late spring or early fall of 2012 with an organization already working in the Elgin area – Community Organizing and Family Issues (COFI). (<http://www.cofionline.org/>) Stakeholders would include parent organization leaders, advisory councils, local community organizations (United Way, YMCA, etc.), business leaders, city officials and district staff.

**Subcommittee Members:** Laurel Bault, Tracy Kelly, Madeleine Villalobos

## **RESOURCE DEVELOPMENT**

Since its inception, the committee has provided principals and school leaders with resources to help in developing successful engagement strategies. Familiarity with these resources has been varied – many principals had a general awareness of the resources (some were actively using them, while others were not); some were not aware of the breadth of resources available. As discussions on survey results and Destination 2015 benchmarks progressed, familiarity began to increase. The committee’s ongoing goal is to develop resources that schools are specifically looking for and to create access to the full-scope of the district’s work on engagement for internal users (those in U-46) and external users (other districts).



## **Principal Meetings**

The committee began meeting with school principals this winter to talk about engagement at their schools. This provided us with first-hand accounts of how schools were engaging their learning communities and allowed us to ask questions about their work. It also gave us the chance to personally ask principals how we can assist them. The first principals to meet with the committee were Mrs. Denise Lockwald, Principal at Sunnydale Elementary (Streamwood), and Mr. Steve Johnson, Principal at Highland Elementary (Elgin). Both schools contributed to the first installment of the U-46 Engagement Best Practices document (below) and inspired the committee with new ideas for resources.

## **“U-46 Engagement Best Practices” Document**

A long-standing committee goal has been to create a “bank” of engagement practices to share with U-46 schools. Many of our schools are doing great things to engage their school families, but other schools do not necessarily know about it. Now those ideas will be captured into the “U-46 Engagement Best Practices” document, an Excel spreadsheet that will be compiled and managed by the committee (Appendix B). Information is organized by component type and includes school information and descriptions of the activities. This list of Best Practices can be used by principals, parent leaders and schools outside the district to help generate ideas on how to engage families. Ideas were garnered from submissions by the U-46 Family Engagement Office (stories from the field), interviews with principals, committee recommendations and a review of engagement ideas in SIPs. This document will continue to expand as new ideas are shared. The U-46 Engagement Best Practices document will be added to the Principal Resource page on the U-46 intranet by June 2012 (see next section).

## **Principal Resource Page**

Thanks to a suggestion by Highland Elementary principal Steve Johnson, the committee worked with district administration (Lynne Huske, Karen Fox) to create a new “Engagement Resources” page link on the existing Principal Resource Page on the U-46 intranet. Mr. Johnson noted that it would be helpful to have engagement information readily accessible via the web, and the committee liked the idea of the resources having a permanent home. The new Engagement Resources page will include the following links:

- Board Policy & Procedures
- U-46 Six Components of Engagement (and worksheet)\*
- Engagement Survey data
- Roadmap for Developing a Successful Family Engagement Plan\*
- U-46 Engagement Best Practices
- PTA Implementation & Assessment Guide
- Other Resources

**Ongoing Work:**

- *Expand the U-46 Engagement Best Practices document. This might include site visits and interviews, additional principal meetings, talking with principals at administrator meetings, email solicitations, meeting with PTOs, etc.*
- *Assist the district in developing “Family & Community Engagement” content for the website (internal and external; see Recommendations).*
- *Develop a video of Engagement Best Practices using the Beacon Academy.*
- *Develop resources from local and national educational organizations to expand our resource bank and to build partnerships for improving engagement. (National Network of Partnership Schools; The Center for School, Family and Community Partnerships at Johns Hopkins University. [www.csos.jhu.edu/P2000](http://www.csos.jhu.edu/P2000) (web); SEDL National Center for Family and Community Connections with Schools <http://www.sedl.org/connections>)*

**Subcommittee Member:** Paula Becker

## RECOMMENDATIONS

**1. The committee recommends that the U-46 Administration actively promote the “Guidelines for Addressing Concerns, Questions & Suggestions” to families and school and district staff. This includes:**

- Reconfiguring the U-46 website’s homepage to include a high-level “Concerns, Questions & Suggestions” link to a site page with information on problem-solving and addressing concerns, questions and suggestions. This would be a change from the sole location on the Parents Web Site. This information should be a highly visible and easy to find on the Home Page.
- Requesting schools to include the same link in a prominent location on school’s website home pages. The guidelines would serve as a template that could be customized with specific school contact information, helping families at their school get in touch with the appropriate person.
- Develop a paper copy of the “Guidelines” to be made available at the front desk at every school; train the front office staffs on the Guidelines so that they can provide immediate assistance on getting the process started.
- Include a bullet-point version of the “Guidelines” in the student handbooks, with a reference to the website link for additional information/resources.

**2. The committee recommends that Administration update the “School Board & Community” information on the district website to include more details on what the Board of Education does and how it interacts with the community.**

It is important for the community to fully understand the role of the Board of Education as well as what areas of the district the Board does and does not impact. It is also important to explain what a community member can expect when they come to a board meeting and to make the distinction that a board meeting is a meeting held in public, not a public meeting. (See #5 in “Guidelines for Addressing Concerns, Questions & Suggestions.”)

**3. The committee recommends that Administration add a “Family & Community Engagement” resource tab to the district website’s home page.**

Since Family Engagement is a key component of the District Improvement Plan and a benchmark in Destination 2015, it’s crucial that the public be given full access to the district’s engagement initiatives and resources. This would allow parent leaders, families and community members to learn what the district and its schools are doing to engage families and how they can become part of the process. It also gives U-46 the opportunity to be a resource to schools outside our district.



## Six Components of Family and Community Engagement

### **1. Welcoming Families to Schools**

*Create a welcoming school environment for all families so they develop a sense of belonging and feel valued and appreciated, leading to active participation in children's education.*

### **2. Communicating Effectively**

*Develop effective, meaningful two-way communication between families and school staff in order to share information about what students are learning.*

### **3. Supporting Student Learning**

*Collaborate with families to strengthen their knowledge and skills so they can support student learning and development at home and at school.*

### **4. Increasing Opportunities & Advocating for All Students**

*Educate families on how the school system works and empower them to become advocates for all children, to ensure equal access to learning opportunities that contribute to student success.*

### **5. Sharing Decision-making with Stakeholders**

*Engage families as equal partners and share the responsibility of influencing decisions on policy and programs that will affect all children.*

### **6. Collaborating with the Community**

*Work with local businesses, community organizations, agencies and institutions of higher learning to connect students, families and staff to expanded learning opportunities and resources.*

U-46 Family & Community Engagement components are based on research/publications including Joyce Epstein's *Six Types of Involvement* and the *National PTA Standards*.