



Family & Community Engagement Committee Report

Spring 2014

COMMITTEE MEMBERS

Natalie Olsen (Fox Meadow Elementary) – Co-Chairperson
Madeleine Villalobos (Bartlett Elementary) – Co-Chairperson
Paula Becker (Elgin High School)
Jeff Book (Hanover Countryside Elementary)
Vanessa Castelan (Oakhill Elementary)
Douglas Edgar (Larkin High School)
Agustin Figueroa (Channing Elementary)
Kristie Guiney (South Elgin High School)
Sandy Kening (Bartlett High School)
Sandy Martin (Eastview Middle School)
Erika Nelson (Prairieview Elementary)
Seth Rindner (Hanover Countryside Elementary)
Julie Winterhalder (Bartlett Elementary)
Bill Baker (Community Member)
Antonio Martinez (Teacher, McKinley Elementary)

DISTRICT LIAISON

Pat Mogge – Director of Community Relations

Approved by CAC Executive Committee – April 24, 2014

Approved by CAC General Council – May 8, 2014

Presented to the Board of Education – June 2, 2014

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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COMMITTEE MISSION & INITIATIVES FOR 2013-2014

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 and assessment of family and community engagement initiatives.*
- *Research standards of behavior at successfully engaged schools.*
- *Work with Community Relations on a model for equipping and empowering parents as leaders.*
- *Continue to build a resource bank of engagement ideas.*

OVERVIEW

For its sixth year of work, the committee focused its attention on listening to and learning from the school administrators who are successfully engaging the families in our schools every day. This time of reflection provided great insight into the behaviors that lead to engagement excellence as well as meaningful feedback on the obstacles to engagement that need more dedicated attention. Since the entire committee participated in the panel discussions, much of the proposed work for the year will be revisited in 2014-2015.

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

To get an accurate picture of how successful our engagement efforts are in the district, the committee continues to believe that several different points of data need to be evaluated: demographics, surveys, engagement plans, school improvement plans, school walk-throughs and school interviews (see below). It continues to be a challenge to pull the various pieces of data into a comprehensive look at how well U-46 is engaging its families and the community, but we feel it's a necessary pursuit if we want to truly determine what is working, what is not and why.

For now, the Family & Community Engagement Survey remains the best snapshot of engagement at our schools. The goal for positive remarks regarding engagement (“strongly agrees” and “agrees” combined) is 95% in year 2015. The 2013 Family & Community Engagement Survey’s positive results rose to 89% overall from 82% in the fall of 2012. Survey questions relate directly to the U-46 Six Components of Engagement, which the district uses to define successful engagement.

The committee was bolstered by the rise in positive responses, but questions remain about the validity of the survey data since respondents can take the survey as many times as they would like. We recognize this can work for or against a school. Ideally, each individual respondent would be provided a unique user code that would eliminate multiple responses from one person.

The committee would also like to see response data for each of the survey questions, which would allow us to track progress in the specific U-46 Components of Engagement. This would provide the committee with the insight on where to best spend it’s time developing resources.

ENGAGEMENT EXCELLENCE: STANDARDS FOR SUCCESS

In last year’s report, the committee spent a good amount of ink casting a vision for what the district could achieve if it developed standards of excellence (behaviors) for everything we do: *“We have standards for learning, standards for achievement, standards for engagement, standards for teaching, standards for fiscal responsibility. But how do we do this with excellence? What are the standards of behavior that ensure we achieve our goals?” (FACE Report 2013)*

Given this push for excellence and our focus on assessing engagement, the committee wanted to know if our schools were acting, communicating, interacting and working to engage their school families in an excellent way (another data point!) We were less concerned with specific engagement programs or events. Instead, we wanted to find out: **What behaviors are the hallmarks to achieving the engagement goals outlined by the district?**

To find out what *behaviors* lead to engagement excellence – and what challenges schools continue to face – the committee hosted two panel discussions with school principals and administrators (elementary and secondary).

ELEMENTARY

In January, the committee hosted six elementary schools: Channing Elementary (Selene Stewart, principal), Garfield Elementary (Peggy Ondera, principal), Ontarioville Elementary (Myrna Burgos, principal, and Lillian Valdes, parent coordinator), Timber Trails (Tom Flanigan, principal), Lincoln Elementary (Mariann Alyea, principal). These schools were selected because

they scored a 92% or better on the 2012 Family Engagement survey. Principals were provided with discussion questions (Appendix A).

It quickly became apparent that there were common behaviors that they all lived out and encouraged in their schools. These principals are passionate about their schools, their students and the families they serve, and they know it directly impacts learning at their schools. The following behaviors are ones that these schools are dedicated to practicing; it is what they feel has led to their rising positive responses on the engagement survey. The committee is sharing what we learned from these schools to herald the positive work being done in the district and to provide ideas on how schools can expand their engagement efforts; it also provides insight into where we, as a district, can offer additional support and resources to help schools continue to grow in these areas. Highlights from the panel include:

CRITICAL BEHAVIORS to creating an exceptional learning environment and engagement excellence:

1. **BUILDING GENUINE RELATIONSHIPS:** These schools stand out because they believe deeply in the power of building personal relationships. This is more than “Welcoming Families to Schools.” This is about becoming *fully vested* in the lives of their students and their families – meeting them where they are at and moving forward together.
 - These schools realize that to gain a foothold academically, a family’s basic needs must be met first. The social and emotional comes before the academic.
 - At the forefront of all conversations is: “How do we support the student?” (Channing). “Not what can you do for us, but what can we do for you” (Garfield).
 - When you show a family your commitment to them, they will respect you and return the commitment.
 - The school is a home away from home – for families and the staff. (Lincoln)

2. **EQUIPPING & EMPOWERING FAMILIES:** Parents need to be given the tools to help their children succeed. These schools take the lead in sharing responsibility for student success.
 - Families need to be educated *personally* – on *education* and on *how to support their children’s learning*. Teachers should model to parents how to help the kids at home, and then parents can put that into practice with their kids at home.
 - Buildings need to be a hub of resources for families and the community. Schools should have an open-door policy and be allowed to serve as beacons of educational opportunities in our communities. This would require a commitment of funds and human resources from the district and community, possibly paying staff for after-school tutoring – for both the child AND the child with their parent.

- You must look at family member’s strengths – not their weaknesses – and build upon them. Everyone has something to contribute; you have to take the time to figure out what that is and be willing to invest in developing them.
 - Unite parents and learning. Kids can show what they are learning and the teachers can model to the parents how to help their kids.
 - Lack of money is a huge obstacle to making this happen, but it needs to be addressed, either through reallocating resources or developing additional funds.
- 3. SETTING HIGH EXPECTATIONS:** Staff sets high goals for the students and then they communicate them to the families and enlist the families as partners in helping the child meet their individual goals.
- 4. MAKING COMMUNICATION A PRIORITY:** Communication is intentional and ongoing. It should be a high priority for each teacher; teachers are the best link to the home.
- The classroom is the launching pad for engagement – the foundational engagement is between what is happening in the classroom and how the families can support that (Channing).
 - These schools continually seek opportunities to hear back from families. It is not just about sending ConnectEd messages or sending home papers. Schools need to provide a forum for engaging in back-and-forth conversations: what do you need, what can we help with, what can we do better?
- 5. MODELING STRONG LEADERSHIP:** Principals have high expectations of their staff and they model positive engagement behaviors. They know that the first impression is critical. They believe that the office staff *is* the frontline; people come before tasks and they lead by example. These principals have a real passion for their jobs and the success of their students and they completely get the direct impact that engaging with the students and their parents have on student learning. They understand that a welcoming environment reflects the culture and language of those who attend the school.

An interesting side note: Back in 2004, the Communications Committee focused much of its work on how schools could better reach the Hispanic families it served. Ten years later, all six of the elementary schools with the highest positive response percentages on the Destination 2015 survey (2012) predominately serve Hispanic families. The 2004 report noted that the best thing schools could do to better reach their families was to meet people where they were at and forge genuine relationships. These elementary schools have embraced building genuine relationships, and it shows in their survey scores.

SECONDARY

In February, the committee hosted nine secondary schools: Larkin High School (Dr. Jon Tuin, Principal), Ellis Middle School (Perry Hayes, Principal), Bartlett High School (Steve Juracka, Associate Principal), Eastview Middle School (Donald Donner, Principal), Tefft Middle School (Lavonne Smiley, Principal), South Elgin High School (Veronica Vazquez, Instructional Chair for Math and Science) Elgin High School (Jerry Cook, Principal), Abbott Middle School (Kathy Davis, Principal), Streamwood High School (Terri Lozier, Principal)

The middle schools were selected because they scored a 90% or better on the 2013 Family Engagement survey. Since there are only five high schools, the committee decided to invite all five to ensure we had good representation from the high school level. All schools' scores will be reported to the Board of Education by the U-46 Community Relations Department in May or June. (Discussion Questions Appendix B).

For the secondary schools, the discussion was broadened to also include a more candid dialogue on the challenges of engaging middle school and high school families. The schools easily identified the behaviors that lead to a successfully engaged school and that help create an exceptional learning environment. However, it was also clear that these schools need additional support to be able to fully invest in these behaviors and expand opportunities to engage in an excellent way.

The following behaviors are ones that these schools believe are crucial to successfully engaging families at their schools. The committee is sharing what we learned from these schools to herald the positive work being done in the district and to provide ideas on how schools can expand their engagement efforts; it also provides insight into where we, as a district, can offer additional support and resources to help schools continue to grow in these areas. Highlights from the panel discussion include:

CRITICAL BEHAVIORS & CHALLENGES to creating an exceptional learning environment and engagement excellence:

1. **ESTABLISHING MEANINGFUL RELATIONSHIPS.** Teachers and administrators are purposeful about establishing and maintaining relationships with students. A meaningful relationship with an adult at the school can make all the difference in the world.
 - All administrators agreed that counselors play a key role because they serve the whole child by guiding the academic, social and emotional well-being of the student. They are the best personal connection between the family and the schools because of this. Unfortunately, they are strapped with high caseloads in high school and are non-existent in middle school. This is a critical missing component at middle school;

there needs to be one person who is advocating for the student, communicating with the family and preparing them for high school.

- Having the right people in the right places helps foster meaningful relationships. When teachers are in roles that best fit their experience and passion they develop better connections with their students and their families. It is difficult when an elementary teacher is moved to high school. If their passion isn't high school students and they aren't used to working with them, it may make relating to the students difficult.
- Quality teachers who are motivated and purposeful in establishing and maintaining relationships with the kids are instrumental in successfully engaging families; they open the door for good dialogue with the student and the parents. It establishes a sense of everyone being in it together. Ongoing support and training for teachers in this area would help further this positive behavior.
- All students can learn – some just need more human capital than others.
- Teachers who model positive behaviors for the students help create a positive learning environment. Student behaviors are often based off of adult behaviors (Abbott). Acknowledge the positive behaviors in your students. When teachers engage in building up their students, the students take pride in their work. One example, South Elgin High School "Because You Are Awesome" awards.
- Teachers who build strong relationships with their students can pull the entire family into the school (Larkin).

2. **MAKING COMMUNICATION A PRIORITY.** These schools all identified communication between the school and home as a crucial component in successful engagement. However, many noted that it remains a struggle to find the best methods for communicating effectively.

- Schools need to be transparent in providing as much information as possible. Parents should not be surprised – they should be informed. (SEHS)
- Schools must figure out what mode of communication works the best for *their* families; for example, Abbott MS still prints paper newsletters for parents (translated) because this is the way the parents prefer to receive communication. It is different depending on the school, and multiple modes are needed.
- Language barriers need to be overcome in a better manner as well. Spanish is not the only second language, and many schools are still struggling with reaching out to these other families. This needs to be addressed moving forward.

- Teachers and administrators need to be responsive to parents. It is up to the schools to provide the information parents need to be informed so they can support their student.
3. **MODELING GOOD CUSTOMER SERVICE.** Key to successful engagement is administrators who lead by example and “that starts with me,” said Ellis principal Perry Hayes. It’s important to set the bar high for having a welcoming front office staff. At Eastview, staff members are encouraged to read “The Disney Way,” which focuses on giving people ultimate service. Take pride in where you work and treat it like your house, said Eastview Principal DJ Donner. Everyone in the building has to make a difference. (Larkin).
 4. **INVESTING IN THE SCHOOL’S ENVIRONMENT.** Many of the schools articulated specific needs that would improve engagement at their schools: adding signage and/or updating/improving signage, improving landscaping and curb appeal. When parents/families arrive at a school, they should be put at ease about where they are sending their child. The outside of a building can say a lot about what goes on in the inside: *Do we take care of what we have been entrusted with?* When families come to school, do they know where to go without having to wander around? Are they welcomed immediately upon entering the building? Can they even find the front office?
 5. **PROVIDING RESOURCES FOR FAMILIES & COMMUNITY.** Successfully engaged schools are a hub for student and family services: classes for GED, economics, ESL for parents. Schools have a great opportunity to empower parents in all facets of their lives so that they can help their children succeed. Students’ primary needs have to be taken care of first. “How do we care about them as people before we ask them to come to Spanish Club?,” asked one administrator. Technology continues to be a deficit for many families: How do we provide students with better access to computers for research? How do we provide them with additional academic support when they cannot get it at home? Administrators would like to see an expansion of the services already offered by U-46.

Additional Committee Ideas to Improving Engagement:

- Mentoring Programs: Bring what’s working to the rest of the district. Offering engagement in-services and partnering up schools (one mentors the other/collaborative).
- Re-examine the opportunities to get students more involved in setting life-time goals and academics and character development to achieve those goals.
- Many shared the importance of meeting with parents and students in their homes to establish relationships and make the point that we are in this pursuit of a fulfilling life together. How much of it is put into practice? What can be done to expand this practice?

- Community resources. Can we look to community partners to sponsor needed improvements at schools (signage, landscaping,)? What about the U-46 Educational Foundation?
- Honor those schools who have achieved a higher standard for Engagement, including all involved; teachers, administrators, students, parents, volunteers. We need to share their achievements and honor their contributions.
- District discussions on ways to improve communication among parents and their students at the secondary levels.

EMPOWERING & EQUIPPING PARENTS

Our subcommittee met with Pat Mogge and Karla Guzman earlier at the beginning of the 2013-2014 school year to discuss setting up a School Based Parent Leadership Institute (SBPL) at a pilot school to begin in Spring 2014. Administrators, teachers and parents received a survey to request their ideas about what they wanted to get out of this institute. At a principal's meeting, principals were invited to offer their building as a place to pilot the program. Several principals volunteered their school buildings. The pilot school building that was selected is Huff Elementary, with an additional two other schools slated to have a School Based Parent Leadership Program in the Fall 2014. The greater mission is to have a SBPL Program available at every school in the U-46 district which will be led by trained facilitators.

Karla Guzman partnered with members and fellows of the Hispanic Parent Leadership Institute and African American Parent Leadership Institute to conduct recruitment phone calls to prospective parents at Huff Elementary and extend invitations to attend the first session on April 8, 2014. The purpose of the April session was to provide prospective parent leaders with a first look at the wonderful rewarding opportunity they could have to learn how to better prepare their student for college or the workplace. We are targeting the month of August 2014 for the selected parent leaders can begin their training to become facilitators for the U-46 SBPL Program.

Planned Work for Academic Year 2014-2015

- *Explore the possibility of using student ID numbers to log into the FACE Survey to ensure the integrity of the response data; possibly two surveys per ID per school to allow up to two adults per student to respond. More research needed to ensure anonymity.*
- *Discuss what steps need to be taken regarding the engagement survey once the district reaches the Destination 2015 deadline. Does the survey need to be modified, expanded?*

- *Conduct onsite interviews with elementary schools principals, staff and families from the panel discussion; possible create a video of promising practices; highlight school's work – How do we create energy and excitement around these great schools?*
- *Research ways to facilitate effective problem-solving: tips for effective communication, training opportunities, additional resources*
- *Research how schools and the district 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?*
- *Research what meaningful engagement might look like at the middle school level by interviewing administration, teaching staff and students at a U-46 middle school. Develop suggestions for identifying appropriate engagement opportunities and encouraging participation at the middle and high school levels.*
- *Continue to expand the U-46 Engagement Best Practices document.*
- *Develop resources from local and national educational organizations to expand our resource bank and to build partnerships for improving engagement.*

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. **The committee recommends that the district look for opportunities to expand services that support the whole family.** The committee agrees with our panel attendees that to truly engage with families, the district must become fully vested in the lives of students and their families – meeting them where they are at and moving forward together. This often means providing families with the education and training they need so that they can successfully support their children; for example, ESL classes for adults, parenting classes, resource centers, access to technology, tutoring at our schools.
2. **The committee recommends that the district provide additional directional signage at schools to better welcome families in our buildings.** The committee also recommends that a district-wide survey of exterior facilities be conducted to ensure that all schools' exteriors are welcoming to families. This includes adding or improving directional signage at middle and high schools as well as how welcoming the building appears from the outside to visitors. The committee recommends using the Beyond the Bake Sale's "welcoming walk-through" survey as a guideline.
3. **The committee recommends that the district provide focused staff development on ways to improve communication and build meaningful relationships with students/families at the secondary level.**
4. **The committee recommends that the district consider expanding the number of counselors at the high school and middle school with respect to other competing funding priorities.** Guidance Counselors provide the best whole-child support of a student at the secondary level and serve as one of the best personal connection points between the family and the schools. At the middle school level, this would provide a much needed bridge for students as they move to high school and would provide another resource for parents as they learn to support their students through this transition.

We acknowledge that all of these recommendations require a financial investment and we equally acknowledge that "disposable income" is not a luxury that the district has. However, we believe that if engagement is a top priority, then the district needs to put considerable effort into finding additional resources for providing schools with these needs; either by reallocating funds, finding new sources of financial support, developing sponsorship relationships with community partners or fostering support relationships between schools.

“Engagement Excellence: Standards for Success” Elementary Principal Panel Discussion

January 14, 2014

Hosted by the CAC Family & Community Engagement Committee

1. In your opinion what are the two most critical behaviors needed to create an exceptional learning environment in our schools? How do you develop and sustain these behaviors?
2. What behaviors and characteristics define a school that is successfully engaged with its families?
3. What have been your most effective strategies in engaging families and the community in at your school? What do you consider to be your biggest challenge in engaging families and the community?
4. How are you engaging the diverse families in your school? How can we do this better throughout the district?
5. What do you consider are the top five "need to haves" for successful engagement? What additional resources and support do you need to increase family engagement at your school?

“Engagement Excellence: Standards for Success” Secondary Principal Panel Discussion

February 18, 2014

Hosted by the CAC Family & Community Engagement Committee

1. In your opinion what are the two most critical behaviors needed to create an exceptional learning environment in our schools? How do you develop and sustain these behaviors?
2. What behaviors and characteristics define a school that is successfully engaged with its families?
3. What do you consider to be the biggest challenges in engaging families and the community?
4. What additional resources and support do you need to increase family engagement at your school?
5. How are you engaging the diverse families in your school? How can we do this better throughout the district?