



**Harvard Family  
Research Project**

**Family Engagement for High School Success:  
Final Grant Report to AT&T**

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*Prepared by Harvard Family Research Project and United Way Worldwide  
as part of the Family Engagement High School Success Initiative, with support from AT&T.*

## SECTION 1 — GRANT TO UNITED WAY WORLDWIDE

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Graduation and dropout rates are the center of the current national conversation around high school reform. President Obama and the United States Department of Education are leading the charge to boost high school and college graduation rates among our nation's students over the next ten years. An active and engaged voluntary sector is critical to meeting these important goals.

Recognizing the need for a comprehensive approach to keeping teens in school and successfully completing high school, AT&T awarded United Way Worldwide a grant to start a new initiative—*Family Engagement for High School Success*. The purpose of the grant was to support a re-granting program for local United Ways designed to create effective parent engagement strategies that help students successfully finish high school and become better prepared for college and work. The project objectives of this initiative were to:

- Partner with the most experienced researchers in this field to help frame the initiative
- Develop a national partnership with key organizations that link parents, communities, teachers, and school administrators
- Make awards to local projects, through an RFP process for implementation in 2010–2011, that incorporate the best parent–student–teacher–school-engagement practices and lead to an increase in students graduating from high school and becoming ready for college and work

The strategic planning process made possible by the AT&T grant was different and innovative. It helped strengthen school and community action plans by emphasizing a holistic view of students in which families supported and advocated for the successful journey of their children through high school graduation. By adopting an outcome-focused approach, and using local data, United Ways designed models of family engagement that removed barriers and built stronger connections between families and schools. The process engaged school and community partners for buy-in and empowered parents and students to take an active role in planning with the result that the strategies addressed their real needs and interests. This was the first time that all stakeholders in these communities participated in developing collective strategies to boost high school graduation rates. The result was action plans that have true potential for success.

### **Importance of Family Engagement Focus**

Family engagement is often overlooked as a strategy for boosting student achievement once children reach middle school and high school. While many teens struggle to assert their independence and initially reject parental involvement in school during these years, engaging families to support their children throughout their academic careers is key to student success. The AT&T grant offered an invaluable opportunity to pioneer strategies for bringing families, communities, students, and school leaders to the table to build a network of supports that keep students on the path to high school graduation, college, and successful lives.

Family engagement in education has been directly related to a range of benefits for students, including improved school readiness, higher student achievement, better social skills and behavior, and increased likelihood of high school graduation. The strongest research evidence further

indicates that parental beliefs, attitudes, values, and childrearing practices, as well as home–school communication, are linked to student success.<sup>1</sup>

Disadvantaged students in particular need the benefits of a learning approach, in which an array of school and non-school supports complement one another to create an integrated set of community-wide resources that support learning and development from birth to young adulthood. Based on this systemic approach to education, effective family engagement consists of the following principles:

- First, family engagement is a shared responsibility in which schools and other community agencies and organizations are committed to engage families in meaningful ways and families are committed to actively support their children’s learning and development.
- Second, family engagement is continuous across a child’s life and entails enduring commitment but changing parental roles as children mature into young adulthood.
- Third, effective family engagement cuts across and reinforces learning in the multiple settings where children learn—at home, in prekindergarten programs, in school, in afterschool and summer programs, in faith-based institutions, and in the community.

This definition of family engagement focuses on children’s learning in a variety of settings—not just in school—and reflects the many different ways in which families, schools, and communities engage with and support one another.

## Grant Process

**Framing the initiative:** United Way Worldwide partnered with Harvard Family Research Project to design a family engagement initiative that would be effective at the high school level. Together the two organizations identified a set of key principles that framed the request for proposal. These principles emphasized that (1) family engagement will depart from a checklist mentality and instead be fully integrated into dropout prevention and high school graduation efforts; (2) family engagement is shared and co-constructed, necessitating the participation of students and families in designing family engagement initiatives; and (3) communities will commit to a data-driven process and to evaluation for learning and accountability.

**Identifying potential local projects through a data-driven process:** United Way Worldwide and Harvard Family Research Project developed an online survey of the United Way network (1,260 United Ways) to determine if there were pockets of practice that could be scaled up or replicated. Two hundred twenty-two United Ways responded.

Survey results confirmed what experts were seeing around the country. The results showed that very few communities were utilizing research-based practices to successfully engage families of at-risk high school students, and most lacked a comprehensive plan or structure to guide efforts, target families most in need, or efficiently utilize available resources. Instead, most communities were relying on scatter-shot approaches to engagement. In addition, few communities looked at local

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<sup>1</sup> Weiss, H. B., Bouffard, S. M., Bridglall, B. L., & Gordon, E. W. (2009). *Reframing family involvement in education: Supporting families to support educational equity*. The Campaign for Educational Equity. New York: Teachers College, Columbia University.

data to ascertain why students are dropping out or why families were not engaged. Rarely were students and families, those for whom the strategies are intended in the first place, involved in developing programs and strategies. And while United Ways were partnering with community-based programs, school district involvement was much more limited—an indicator that their family engagement work was not effecting systemic change.

Of the communities represented in the survey, 110 were invited to submit a proposal. To elicit the strongest candidates (those most likely to be using research-informed practices and most likely to create systemic change around family engagement) the request for proposal focused on key characteristics of effective parent–teacher relationship programs. Key characteristics included opportunities for family engagement in the home, school, and community; a wide variety of parental roles linked to student learning; parent-to-parent relationships; school and community commitment; and innovative communication, such as text messaging. In addition, the request for proposal identified measurable outcomes and methods of documenting progress and results.

**Collaborating with expert organizations:** In addition to partnering with Harvard Family Research Project, United Way Worldwide leveraged the expertise and resources of several national partners. These partners formed a review team to evaluate the 62 proposals received from local communities. The review was a two-step process whereby two reviewers read and scored each proposal and then met as a full team to make final investment recommendations.

The review team was composed of Beth Ann Bryan and Sandy Kress of Akin-Gump, and staff from the following organizations: American Association of School Administrators, Coalition for Community Schools, Communities in Schools, National Parent Teacher Association, and United Way Worldwide. In addition to reviewing and scoring proposals and making final funding recommendations based on the merits of the proposals, the partners contributed technical assistance at the local level and were featured in webinars that were made available to all local United Ways.

Based on the quality of the proposals, 15 communities were funded and an additional four were invited to be unfunded participants in a learning community.

## **SECTION 2 — A RESEARCH-INFORMED PLANNING PROCESS**

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Based on an extensive review of the research, Harvard Family Research Project proposed that community projects should demonstrate a shared responsibility for family engagement.<sup>2</sup> Schools and communities should address the barriers to family engagement—including those related to social disadvantage and cultural differences—and provide meaningful opportunities for families to take action.

The research further indicated that having parents and students participate in planning and implementing family engagement efforts would increase the likelihood that schools and communities would develop strong strategies and that families would become meaningfully engaged in student success. In contrast to the prevailing emphasis on activities, family engagement efforts

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<sup>2</sup> Weiss, Bouffard, Bridgall, & Gordon, 2009.

would need to focus on student outcomes and become a core part of school and community efforts to stem dropout rates and promote college- and career-readiness.

Because research shows that family engagement is effective from early childhood through young adulthood, Harvard Family Research Project proposed that projects demonstrate continuity of engagement strategies, beginning with the transition from middle to high school and continuing throughout the high school years. The middle to high school transition is a critical period on the road to academic success. Research indicates that student experiences at ninth grade affects graduation rates and that attendance, in particular, determines course passing, with students more likely to finish ninth grade on track if they have good attendance.<sup>3</sup> On the other hand, course failure—leading to lack of credit accumulation—and poor attendance each increase the likelihood of dropping out.<sup>4</sup>

Because family engagement occurs wherever children learn, projects should demonstrate opportunities for family engagement in the home, school, and community. In fact, across various ethnicities—Caucasian, African-American, and Latino—effective family engagement practices focus on “academic socialization,” which includes family discussions about schooling and school goals, expectation for graduation, and providing extracurricular activities to enrich educational experiences and teach time management.<sup>5</sup>

These findings also suggest that projects should focus on student learning. Schools and community organizations can communicate high school graduation requirements and the value of college. This is especially important for newly immigrated families who are unfamiliar with the United States system of education. Schools can also provide data on student attendance and performance to families and make available resources for struggling students as well as those seeking to enhance their learning.

However, African-American and Latino parents show greater concern about managing peer relationships and out-of-school time activities lest their teens fall into wrong company. African-American parents tend to prepare their adolescents for a world that will not give them a fair chance while Latino parents often find the notion of equal partnership between families and schools hard to grasp. Furthermore, the Latino concept of education is broad, and refers not only to academic competence but also to good moral character.<sup>6</sup>

These findings reinforce the need to engage students, families, and communities in an inclusive planning process so that local concerns can shape family engagement initiatives. There is no single approach for family engagement and strategies are likely to succeed when adapted to the social and cultural contexts of families and leverage community resources.

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<sup>3</sup> Allensworth, E. M. and Easton, J. Q. (2007). *What matters for staying on track and graduating in Chicago public schools*. Chicago: Consortium on Chicago School Research.

<sup>4</sup> Neild, R. C., Stoner-Eby, S., & Furstenberg, F. (2008). Connecting entrance and departure: The transition to ninth grade and high school dropout. *Education and Urban Society*, 40(5), 543-569.

<sup>5</sup> Hill, N., Tyson, D., & Bromell, L. (2010). Developmentally appropriate strategies across ethnicity and socioeconomic status. In Hill, N. & Chao, R. (Eds.) *Families, schools, and the adolescent* (pp. 53-72). New York: Teachers College Press.

<sup>6</sup> Hill, Tyson, & Bromell, 2010.

## Addressing Barriers to Family Engagement

Families want their children to succeed academically. However, family engagement is particularly challenging for low-income and newly immigrant families, where parents often hold multiple jobs, and lack the time, resources, and skills to navigate the school system. It is these parents with less education, lower incomes, and children in low-performing high schools that are likely to see their own involvement as critical to their children's success.<sup>7</sup> Unfortunately, they perceive a huge gap between home and school. Parents of children in low-performing high schools seldom have productive conversations with teachers about their child's performance; they rate their schools as not doing a good job of informing them of high school graduation requirements and college admission; and they feel that their engagement in their children's education is lacking and that they need to do better. These parents feel that schools need to reach out to them in the middle school years to help them and their children make the transition to high school, and ensure their children's pathway to successful high school graduation.<sup>8</sup> For family engagement efforts to succeed, it is imperative that barriers be removed and that parent and student voices be included in the design and implementation of these efforts.

## SECTION 3 — PLAN DEVELOPMENT PROCESS

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The plan development process responded to a need by communities—as reflected in their proposals—for more knowledge and guidance about effective family engagement practices. United Way Worldwide and Harvard Family Research Project agreed that grantees would need to build an outcome-focused plan for family engagement in order to clarify desired student outcomes and align them with family engagement strategies appropriate to adolescents. Beginning with a December 2009 kickoff grantee meeting, grantees learned about the process of outcome-focused planning and effective elements of family engagement strategies at the high school level and among culturally diverse student populations.

The planning process was broken into four phases, and a webinar/conference call was held during each phase for grantees to learn more about that phase, ask questions, get guidance from experts as well as peers, and prepare to report their progress. At the end of each phase, grantees submitted detailed reports on their results to date, with the final report being a complete, comprehensive family engagement plan for high school success. The success of this effort was evaluated based on the quality of the final plans as well as a survey completed by grantees with their feedback on the process.

### Results of the Planning Process

The planning process in and of itself was an innovation—it helped strengthen community action plans by providing focus and emphasizing the use of local data and alignment of strategies with desired outcomes. It engaged school and community partners for buy-in and empowered parents and students to take an active role in planning so that strategies would address their real needs and interests.

Although the process was more intensive than anticipated by United Way Worldwide or grantees, it proved to be a game-changing experience. Grantees found themselves and their communities

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<sup>7</sup> Bridgeland, J. M., Dilulio, J. J., Streeter, T. T., & Mason, J. R. (2008). *One dream, two realities: Perspectives of parents on America's high schools*. Washington, DC: Civic Enterprises.

<sup>8</sup> Bridgeland, Dilulio, Streeter, & Mason, 2008.

coming together in entirely new ways—working with new partners; talking to dropouts, students, and families; using local data coupled with national research to guide important decisions; leveraging new resources; and developing a shared community-wide vision. Several grantees indicated that partnering with school districts was often difficult, with school districts being primarily interested in money but not necessarily further community collaboration. Most grantees found obtaining data from the school system to be especially difficult, with many school districts working from fragmented, disparate data collection systems. Additionally, school districts, both as a whole or at specific schools, had not done deep analysis of student data to really understand the issues impacting student dropout and academic failure. Instead, dropout prevention strategies were funded and implemented based on assumptions that were sometimes erroneous.

All grantees recognized a strong partnership with the school district as critical for the ultimate success of implementation and found that the process helped to engage them. All of the communities felt that engaging school and community partners was essential to create a feasible action plan and that it enabled partners to make better use of their resources. One grantee commented, “Many community organizations are working on family involvement. This was the first time many of them had been at the same table or even aware of the others’ activities. It gave us a real chance to align resources and identify gaps in services.” The planning process helped to focus community partners on making decisions for the common good. Another grantee commented, “Change is difficult for the school and community partners; getting buy-in has not been easy. [We are] constantly reminding them, ‘Are we working with the right solutions to the problems?’”

Through the planning process, grantees gained a deeper understanding of the obstacles to family engagement. They learned, as one grantee said, that “communication [between schools and families] was far more broken than we realized,” and that “schools were frustrated by the lack of family participation, but families were frustrated by not having an opportunity to be involved.” They discovered family strengths upon which they could build their action plans: Families want to learn new school information, including the use of technology; they like to network and share ideas; and they seek more direct contact with teachers.

The planning process has laid the foundation for a continuing partnership. Grantees report that they are likely to continue meeting with school and community partners over the next year to continue to develop, refine, and review project activities. According to one grantee, “We’re not letting go. This feels like a partnership for life.” Grantees will work with their partners to raise funds for the project. The most likely sources of funds are foundations, individual major donors, and Title I. Seven grantees plan to use revenues raised in annual local United Way campaigns to support the project.

At the end of the planning stage, it was clear to grantees, United Way Worldwide, and Harvard Family Research Project that the process was pivotal in the ability of the 15 communities to effectively impact student achievement through family engagement. Without the planning process and thoughtful technical assistance, these communities would have likely done “business as usual”—continuing to base strategies on (often incorrect) assumptions about student populations and their families and working in isolation from other key players such as the school leaders, community programs, parents, and students—resulting in uncoordinated, inefficient, and costly efforts that are under-utilized and fail to help students succeed.

Through this inclusive planning process, the communities developed a network of strategies that have much greater potential to change the lives of high school students, helping put them on the path to graduation and careers, and, more importantly, helping students stay on that path.

## **SECTION 4—LESSONS FROM THE PLANNING GRANT**

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The grant yielded important lessons about the value of an outcomes-focused and inclusive planning process. It raised the awareness among communities that knowing who they were serving, why they were serving them, and what hinders family engagement paved the way for creating strategies that were more likely to result in desired outcomes.

### **Focus on the Students Most “At Risk” of High School Dropout**

More than 1.2 million students drop out of public high schools each year. Identifying these students in order to get them on track to graduation is often a challenging task. Many schools lack tracking systems, leaving teachers and principals confused about actual graduation rates.<sup>9</sup> Without accurate local data, program interventions risk serving students based on stereotypes rather than facts. By adopting an outcomes-based approach to program intervention, the grant avoided this situation. The planning process drove home the importance of being specific about the “at-risk” students to be served and the data to confirm their status.

The change in mindset among the 15 communities is clear upon comparing their original October 2009 proposals and their subsequent action plans. For example, York, PA initially described its project population as high risk students “who will be identified through school records, referrals from faith based and community institutions, health clinics and government agencies, and self referrals.” Through the planning process, school and community partners in York arrived at a specific, data-driven profile of the students most at-risk of dropping out:

- Rising ninth graders who were retained a grade in middle school
- Rising ninth graders who were suspended more than once in the first semester of 2009–2010 school year
- Rising ninth graders who have scored basic or below basic on PSSA (state) test
- Rising ninth graders who are habitually truant

Equipped with local data, community partners identified who they were serving, specific outcomes for the target audience (e.g., attendance, GPA, course credits, reduced disciplinary actions) and the family engagement strategies to align with the student outcomes chosen.

By emphasizing the use of local data to determine at-risk students, communities are making better decisions about the use of resources. In Brownsville, Texas, for example, school administrators had long thought that low-income, limited English proficiency, and behavioral problems were the key predictors of dropping out. But a closer look at student data from the 2010 graduating class revealed that attendance and grades were the true indicators. Based on this new insight, the principal assigned 30 failing ninth graders to an intensive remediation program. As a result, those

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<sup>9</sup> Bridgeland, J., Dilulio, J. J., & Balfanz, R. (2009). *On the frontlines of schools: Perspectives of teachers and principals on the high school dropout problem*. Washington, DC: Civic Enterprises.



“quietly failing students” students are completing the year with credits in four core subjects and are on track to graduate.

Furthermore, communities are focusing their family engagement interventions on rising ninth graders or ninth graders, with only a few planning to target upperclassmen in the first year of program implementation. Thus, they are taking a preventive approach in addressing students’ difficulties at the beginning of their high school experience, before problems have become deeply entrenched.

## **Understand the Barriers to Family Engagement**

The planning process empowered schools to ask themselves, as well as their students and families, some hard questions—namely, why are students struggling to graduate and why aren’t more parents worried about their teens’ risks? Across the communities involved in the planning process, surveys, focus groups, and planning meetings revealed similar barriers to family engagement and student support. One theme that consistently emerged was that parents did not feel welcome at the schools or felt intimidated by the school environment. Parents also felt that schools did not communicate with parents until it was too late, initiating contact only after a student was failing or after a student had a disciplinary problem.

A second common issue was the language barrier: In many of the grantee communities, immigrants make up a large portion of the population, and not only do the parents not necessarily speak English, but they also may be unfamiliar with how the U.S. education system works. Parent meetings revealed that many parents did not realize the effect that unexcused absences had on their child’s graduation chances or that students’ missing classes to care for younger siblings was not considered an excused absence.

Many surveys showed that families and parents wanted to be involved in their teens’ education, but did not have the resources to do so. In some communities, this was because students had already excelled beyond their parents’ academic levels. In some cases, it was simply that parents did not know what positive effects family engagement could have on their child’s academic progress, or what effective family engagement looked like. In many communities, parents did not know what academic resources (such as tutoring help or afterschool programs) were available to their students, or how to find out about them. In addition, families did not always have the time to be involved. In both San Francisco, CA and Fort Lauderdale, FL, many parents revealed that their work schedules limited their ability to attend school meetings or help with homework.

For the most part, barriers were the result of breakdowns in communication: Families did not feel informed and did not feel empowered to initiate communication with school staff themselves; information was not communicated by the school in a way that was accessible to families; and information was not communicated until after it was too late to take action to prevent students from falling off the academic track or having disciplinary problems. When schools did make an effort to communicate students’ status to parents, they often failed to do so in an accessible manner. Many families in the focal communities lacked computers or internet access at home. This meant they had no way to access the new technologies that schools had begun to employ, such as “parent portals” to online student data systems.

## Remove the Barriers

Identifying the obstacles communities face enabled the schools, families, and community leaders to develop action plans that have potential to make a difference by addressing these challenges head-on. As a result, schools and community partners are integrating family engagement with high school graduation and college readiness goals. Schools are using multiple strategies to reach out to parents and build trust, and inform them at the beginning of their child's high school career about graduation requirements and expectations for attendance, grades, credit accumulation and discipline.

For many schools, the first step lay in opening communication channels to families and making families feel as though their input and participation is valued and important. In Brownsville, TX, for example, schools plan to invite incoming freshmen and their families to a Summer Academy before the school year to see the campus, establish relationships with staff and co-create a graduation plan for each student with input from students, parents, and teachers.

In many communities, schools realized that their existing fall orientation programs were not providing enough accessible information, and were not succeeding in engaging families. A number of grantee proposals included plans to significantly overhaul schools' freshman orientations to include more sessions for families, offer more in-depth explanations of graduation and attendance requirements, and establish connections between staff and families to plant the seeds for communication throughout the year. At Waukegan High School in Gurnee, IL, for example, school staff reached out to the Latino Leadership Council, the High School Faith Council, and the Hispanic Institute to develop a comprehensive fall freshman orientation that will address language barriers, engage families, and convey information in an accessible and usable way. In San Francisco, CA, a group of ninth grade teachers is working with a community-based college-readiness program to develop an orientation program that highlights the pathway to college from day one.

In addition to rethinking communications at the beginning of the year, school leaders were empowered to change their school's entire culture of outreach. In Greenville, NC, for example, schools are planning professional development opportunities for faculty to strengthen home-school relations and help staff identify ways to proactively reach out to parents rather than waiting until problems have emerged. Additionally, to overcome families' preconceptions and anxieties about interacting with school staff, many communities have tapped a point person to oversee family-school communication. This point-person is charged with initiating conversations with families, serving as an accessible contact for questions and concerns, and conveying important information about student progress or school events. These liaisons are using various methods of communication to reach families, from home visits and phone calls to text messages and emails. In Fort Lauderdale, FL, the point person is called the "Student Advocate" and is charged with attending meetings, athletic events, and other activities on behalf of parents who cannot attend due to inflexible work schedules or other issues. The advocates are there to not only communicate to parents important information that might have been missed, but also help students feel supported even when their families cannot be present.

To address language and cultural barriers in many of the focal communities where immigrants make up a large percentage of the population, schools have hired liaisons from within the community. Schools are planning to translate school information that goes home to parents. Many of the online parent link systems are now available in multiple languages.

Fort Lauderdale has begun using multiple means of communication to reach parents whose long work hours make it harder for them to engage with schools: Schools plan to use radio stations and newspapers to promote school events and personal communications by teachers and guidance counselors through handwritten notes, telephone calls, Facebook postings, and e-mail. In Brownsville, TX, parents revealed that the best way to contact them is through text messaging. Plans are underway to use bulk messaging for attendance information and personal texts from family coordinators.

### **Connect Families to Knowledge and Resources**

In many communities, schools and United Ways saw a need for more formal ways to convey information to parents, especially when it came to explaining schools' online data systems and making sure parents understood graduation and attendance requirements. As a result, a number of schools are developing workshops to provide small groups of parents with computer training and show them how to access student data on online data portals, such as Infinite Campus and Parent Link. Washoe County schools began holding evening workshops to train parents on using computers and accessing the online student data portal, and to explain the grading system, attendance policies, and graduation requirements to students' families, many of whom were new to the U.S. education system. Schools in Greenville, NC and Nashville, TN plan to offer workshops on disciplinary strategies and how to help students with homework.

To address the lack of access to computers, many schools have tapped community organizations or libraries to host computer kiosks where parents can log in to student data systems during non-school hours. One high school in York, PA has opened up its new computer lab for parent use: parents use computers to access student data, as well as for personal use, such as GED, ESL/ELL training, resume writing, and other tasks. Not only does this provide parents with a needed resource, but it also invites families into the school building, breaking down barriers to engagement. Other communities are developing Parent Resource Centers in schools or community centers where parents can have a one-stop shop with computers and parenting resources such as information about graduation requirements or academic support services.

The Parent Liaisons or Family Resource Coordinators mentioned previously are the cornerstones to many of the communities' plans to connect parents to academic supports and resources. Many schools have existing relationships with afterschool programs, tutors, and even online educational programs, but fail to communicate these opportunities to parents effectively. When a parent receives grades or attendance records showing that their student needs extra help, the liaison can act as the middleman between the appropriate program and the family. By involving community leaders and local organizations in the planning process, United Way has raised awareness of community resources and helped establish relationships between schools, families, and community programs. A big part of connecting parents to appropriate resources means keeping these channels of communication open.

### **Capitalize on Parent-to-Parent Relationships**

Many grantees are attempting to foster healthy peer relationships among parents and develop strong family networks to improve and sustain their engagement strategies. Parent mentoring programs are a common strategy. The programs provide parents with a point person who is an approachable peer, speaks their own language, and often shares their cultural background. Mentors can speak from their own experience about parenting and navigating the school system. They help

to disseminate important information, provide reminders about upcoming events, and serve as spokespersons for mentees (especially those who have trouble attending school events due to work schedules).

In Dallas, TX, mentors will be recruited from the cohort of parents who have completed the district's parenting classes. Participants will be carefully matched based on common experiences related to student discipline and truancy court involvement. In Greenville, NC, the project will expand an existing student-to-student mentoring program to offer a program called Parent Link, which will involve returning parents serving as mentors to the targeted freshman families. The transition program will begin with a student and parent orientation at each high school campus designed to help foster family-to-family connections.

In addition, many projects plan to create parent councils, made up of and governed by families, giving them a comfortable venue to network and provide feedback on how the school might better serve their teens. Already in Brownsville, TX, likely parent council participants have expressed a desire to learn parenting techniques, including how to communicate with their teenagers, discipline effectively, and encourage their students to succeed in school. In Lima, OH, parent council participants will also be encouraged to reach out to additional families and engage them in the process to broaden the scope of the parent councils' work.

## **Engage Communities to Take Responsibility for Student Success**

Families, schools, and community organizations all contribute to student achievement; the best results come when all three work together. When that happens, students have an extensive support network with multiple parties engaged in their success, ensuring students have the guidance and resources they need to stay on the pathway to graduation and college and beyond.

Through the grant, communities have leveraged their extensive networks to develop action plans that equip families with the support they need to help their teens make the journey to high school graduation. Community businesses in Jackson, MS, for example, organized a book drive to stock targeted libraries with the required summer reading books for local high school students, making resources more accessible and helping to address summer learning loss. These libraries are hosting book clubs around the required reading to allow students and their families to meet to share their ideas about the books. In addition, community partners such as Jobs for Mississippi Graduates and America Reads plan to offer academic enrichment programs throughout the year.

Community partnerships enhance school efforts at early family outreach and orientation to the world of high school. They often fill the void between parents that do not have the information to help their teens and schools that lack the capacity to meaningfully engage families, especially those who are not familiar with the U.S. system. From Gurnee, IL—where the United Way worked with the Latino Leadership Council, the Waukegan High School Faith Council, and the Hispanic Institute to create a fall freshman orientation—to Winston-Salem, NC—where school leaders recognized that the local faith-based organization had the best potential to reach the school community—school leaders are acknowledging the importance of reaching out to community organizations who have the knowledge-base and connections to engage students and their families, even across cultural divides.

Many communities have existing afterschool enrichment programs for youth. These programs have been shown to improve attendance and academic performance; develop leadership, team-building, and social skills; and promote the development of strong relationships with adults and peers. It is therefore important that families are aware of these afterschool opportunities and encourage their teens to participate in them. Through the planning grant, community partners are working to ensure that families know about and have access to these mentoring and tutoring programs.

## **CONCLUSION**

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The AT&T grant began a change process that increased the likelihood of developing implementable and effective family engagement strategies.

### **Crucial Participants**

Bringing parents and students to the table raised awareness among schools and community organizations about the barriers to, and opportunities for, family engagement. Parents demonstrated that they have high hopes for their children's successful completion of high school. At the same time, parents felt disengaged from their schools. Parents shared what they thought schools and community organizations could do. Through an inclusive planning process, the United Ways were able to transform these parent perspectives into action plans that could engage families in achieving desirable student outcomes.

### **Key Elements**

Through an outcomes-based approach to program planning, the AT&T grant helped 15 communities develop action plans that focused on the most at-risk students and their families. By collecting local student data, communities identified desired student outcomes and developed school and community strategies for family engagement that could, in turn, support those outcomes. Across the sites, student outcomes focused on improving attendance and grades among ninth graders so that they could successfully transition to the next grade level.

The research based on family engagement in adolescence points to the need to differentiate engagement efforts in high school from those in elementary school. It meant that the communities had to pay attention to providing families with knowledge and skills to support learning that is consistent with youth development and the demands of high school. Many of the planned family engagement strategies in the action plans also demonstrate opportunities for family engagement that honor and respect the economic and socio-cultural realities of families. They reflect a shared responsibility among schools, communities, and families for student success.

### **Role of Technology**

Technology is being used in innovative ways to boost family engagement. Across the 15 communities, families are using online data systems to stay abreast of student attendance, grades, and credits, and to monitor and support their teens' progress. Technology is also being used to enhance two-way communication through text messaging—which some parents have said is the most convenient way to reach them—and information-sharing through websites and social media.

### **Early Results**

Parents and students are getting support in various ways, including school and community resources to keep teens on track for graduation. Family liaisons are being deployed to begin developing relationships with families, community volunteers are being tapped to offer computer

assistance for projects and to donate required summer reading books for rising ninth graders, and principals are offering remediation programs for failing students. These early results could not have happened without the key elements of the planning process—an inclusive, outcomes-focused, and research-informed process.

## **Summary**

The AT&T grant enabled communities to rethink and rebuild relationships, not only between schools and families, but also between community organizations that had otherwise been operating on their own islands. By empowering local United Ways to pull together school staff, students and families, and community leaders, this planning process enabled new perspectives to be heard and multiple resources to be aligned, building a strong network of supports with a greater potential to put teens on the path to graduation—and keep them there.