

Family, School, and Community Connections Symposium:
New Directions for Research, Practice, and Evaluation
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VOICES FROM THE FIELD

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I am in my element. I want to particularly thank Catherine and Heather, I said this, I told Heather this morning without SEDL and without the Harvard Family Project there clearly would be a void in the work that all of us are doing. We appreciate the efforts, having pleasantly served the steering committee with SEDL I know that this is not always easy and I'm sure its not easy at Harvard either. The issues that Mary talked about and I'd like to work for you as a superintendent if you went back into the business is really and underdeveloped profession, an underdeveloped area of educational reform. Actually, when I was in the business Ron Edmonds didn't get this, Lezott didn't get it, Ted Sizer doesn't get it. I love all these reformers, but the one thing that is underdeveloped going back to a lot of the reform research in the late 60s and early 70s was the issues of family connections and where I really want to thank you for bring us all together. These are not, we don't come together a lot, and I think this is really an important element, an event to you to host and we really appreciate it. Especially you all, I believe you are the connective tissue in the communities and the organizations you work with. It is a pleasure to take a day out of my schedule, and I thank you for taking the time from your busy schedules and come to Harvard and talk about some very important issues.

The Public Education Network has been involved in education reform for over 10 years. In fact, one of the largest of our educational friends is the Boston Education Network partnership lead by Ellen Guidings with our friend Karen Mapp, but we have 89 of these education friends around the country. It originally began as a support system for public education and they are quickly turning into political systems and policy development systems to nudge and urge school districts especially in urban and poor communities to begin to make some changes. We, quickly observed over the last number of years that there is heck of a lot of top down advice given to local school districts and especially local schools. We've been just generally collecting anecdotal information, focus groups, surveys, annual polls. We began to discover that the local community and especially the parents in community based organizations indicated to us that they felt a powerlessness about making any changes or accessing the system at the local level. And so what we have done over this past year is spent the entire year listening to the parents in the local community and with great new technology PowerPoint and CDs; we began pulling together focus groups and spent six months collecting the voices of parents around No Child Left Behind which we will be releasing in January and making recommendations on the basis of those voices.

But another area, and it's an area that I know that you and I have often felt challenged about and that is not only this area of parent and community connections. And I really do like the word connections. I think it really says it all, related to elementary and middle school, but there was a special frustration about how to access and become involved at the high school level. Mary talked about one issue and element and I think it's really an important one for us to remember. We are in the midst of changing public education system that was really focused on access. We wanted Amy, remember the Norman Rockwell, the one in the *Washington Post*, we wanted to get every Amy down on the front of that school bus, but also in the front of the classroom. We got the Amy's in our public schools. The issue and challenge is not that we have Amy in the school, but how to assure that Amy gets a quality public education. Not for just a few children, but for every child. Our school system is not designed to do that and if high school parental involvement was not adequate during the access years they clearly are not adequate during the years of what we call proficiency and standard-based reform.

So we'd like to share with you some voices from the field. How parents describe their involvement in high schools. I indulge your patience first of all; this is a draft. What we did was we pulled a lot of voices out of our encyclopedia of voices and we quickly put them on PowerPoint. It is not a finished product, but we wanted to show you and share these with you that none the less and I also indulge your patience because I'm sitting back here running the PowerPoint and I have had the experience of technology just suddenly, and I think it's ecumenical, I'm Catholic, and I do believe in a lot of miracles. Something just happens to technology. So Eric and all of you guys if you're listening, be prepared.

As we talk to parents, about other community members, we wanted to share five issues that they felt were to be not a barrier, but clearly a challenge and a frustration. Clearly they do not want to play school. They all told us we do not want to be the school. We don't want to take over the school. We don't want to be the teacher, but we do want some input and we do want some relationship in the school. They all felt that parental connections and involvement at the high school level was absolute imperative. They struggled, literally struggled about how to access that system. They said they knew how to access elementary schools, but they really didn't know how to grab a hold of this high school, especially large urban high schools. They all agree that elementary parental involvement was less difficult than high school, than secondary involvement, but despite all of this, besides firefighters and police officials, teachers are America's number one heroes, and they all relied on some relationship with their teachers. They overwhelmingly supported their high schools in spite of the fact that they were difficult to access and they also had trouble finding the words to describe involvement. I think for us this becomes an important dimension, not how we describe it, but how is it that our community describes involvement and wouldn't surprise you that it is all over the place. Not one person we asked linked research with the involvement strategies or recommendations. So if we take anything out of our conference Heather and Catherine, it is that we have to figure out ways besides strategies in the classroom of linking our research with what works within those classroom. I think that is a real challenge. If we get through that today, we will probably answered a big question, especially for a lot of superintendents, who are clearly not connected with the research as well. So if this goes haywire, I'm going to begin. I going to speed up a little bit Catherine, because I know we're a little bit behind time.

Voice 1

First of all parents need to know what questions to ask: what does it take to graduate? Are the students online to graduate? Are the students in themselves getting good information on career and college or vocational information. That's the very first day of the student's freshman year. Parents' role in secondary education is as diverse as the school ... attend. A parent should be involved in the decision making at the school and the district level. This is the highest level of involvement. There are many roles in between and it's up to the parents where they feel comfortable. As you build your confidence and your expectations move on up. Eventually, you will reach the point of people really listening to you.

Voice 2

There are two ways I think we can work at improving parent involvement in our public high schools. One is to make sure that it's parents who are at the front of engaging other parents. I think there is a lot we can do to help build the capacity of, maybe not necessarily through what we think of as PTAs, but almost more of a community organizing sort of way of thinking, getting parents to be the folks who are connecting with other parents to get them involved. I think we kind of put that on the back of folks working just in the schools and the people react to folks who act like, look like, talk like, and have the experiences of others like themselves, so the extent to which we can build the capacity of parents to engage other parents, the more we can bring them along. That would be great. Another is what we've seen in cities like Kansas City where they implemented a very strong family advocate system in high schools where every adult in the high school has a relationship with 10-12 students, sort of like advisor advising on steroids. The notion is that every parent knows that there is one adult in the school who knows their kids by name, their kids know them and those are the people who have 3 or 4 parent conferences with parents in their homes during the course of the school year. Not necessarily their teacher. It can be some other adult in the school, but there is a connection there with an adult and that kid and that adult and that kid's family and they are in regular communication with them. So I think those are two ways we can help get parents more involved.

Voice 3

How would we go about bringing, about parents involved in high school. I really, really think that this a very challenging path and one reason being is because the time schedule of the parents and the different teachers that a student has. However, it's something that I really believe needs to be mandated. At most high schools, seniors are given a packet of things they must do before they graduate and that packet of informationcommunity service...I also think there should be a section... that you cannot graduate unless you get certain...involvement from your parents atif we just specifically says 20 or 30 hours of parental involvement in ...years...you'd make the parents more...without pressure of time and you will possible...

Voice 4

Parental and school leadership collaboration are absolutely vital to the success of a student and in high schools, many times we forget that we're addressing the whole students and we departmentalize ourselves and get into subject areas and we forget about the whole student. Just like teachers in high schools begin to focus just on their teaching area and forget about integrating subject matter across the curriculum. Then, in addition to that as we begin leaving that integration behind, we also forget that parents are partners. Just like we're out there looking for business partners, parents are partners. When we get to the high school level, especially in rural areas or areas where the education level of the parents of the parents is not even 50 percent high school graduate, we forget many times that those parents do not have the skills to parent their children.

Voice 5

My name is Jeff Edmondson. I work with the Knowledge Works Foundation. I think I would offer to speak to the organization as well. Probably, the things we talk about would be hearts and minds that we're not just trying to convince people on a logical level why this is necessary. We also need to be able to think outside of box, the community that is. The community needs to be engaged. We need to think about what could be, because right now, they are stuck in what is. They are not really offered the opportunity to answer the question. You know, say could have anything, say these schools could be, you know, exactly what you wanted, what would that look like, and if they were offered the opportunity to dream in that way, to imagine what their schools were. And then, brought into the process of actual decision making, I think that that would help them to be more inclined to be involved. The other more practical be, first making the schools more community oriented, making sure that these buildings that are being built for billions and billions of dollars are not antiquated the day that they are opened, that they look towards the future and offer not just opportunities for the kids, but also for the community. Libraries can be located in there, theaters. So that, parents are brought in and in low income communities, these can be social services, so that there's real opportunities to continually engage parents and there's opportunities for them to benefit from the school beyond just their students.

Voice 6

Parent involvement in high schools in the 21st Century will demand two major changes. One is how to open the academic work to engage parents in really honest ways. For example, young people doing genealogy for history and, of course, any course could involve certainly the families. They might even involve extended families that they don't know about and that could be done through photography. That could be done through interviews. That could be done through oral histories, a whole series of possibilities there. Like wise the parents are involved in asking questions of young people about what they are doing day to day, sharing readings or major issues of the public life. This year's election is a great example. Those discussions are imperative to the quality of intellectual thought for young people in schools to do well and the quality of this task can bring to bear. Secondly, this calls for a different concept of schooling. The emphasis is on learning and really connecting knowledge in the real lives of real kids in real time.

Voice 7

One of the same philosophies we employ to engage parents at the elementary school level are applicable at the high school level. We all know that parents want the best for their children. It's a matter of finding ways in which, as a school and as a community, we welcome parents and provide parents a space to access new information on how they can help their children, how they can help their children reach the next level, that is high school level successfully, whether that is going off to college or whether that is finding a profession. Parents have a role to play in supporting their children and schools and community have a role to play in helping parents help their children achieve the next level. The role of the non-profit organizations in this can be to provide teachers with space and students with space to think about strategies on how to engage parents across all grade levels.

Voice 8

I think there are some challenges and opportunities to parent involvement at the high school level. One of the challenges is that parents have the capacity at the elementary school level to really work with one or a very small group of teachers because of the structure of elementary schools. You really see the shift as kids move through the K-12 continuum to students having multiple teachers which I think adds a challenge to parents' abilities to interact specifically with teachers. There's just that many more teachers that parents need to keep track of and I think that's a real challenge. There's an interesting opportunity though with high school and parent involvement in that parents need to be looking at some of services that high schools provide in ways that are not germane in the elementary level. And in particular what comes to mind is the whole area of guidance and college preparation, college readiness, understanding the whole college admissions process, definitely an area for parent involvement.

Arnold Fege

We hope that cues up our conference and gives us a little idea of one, this lack of definition around involvement, but the other is this idea that whether you're red or whether you're blue or if you're rural conservative, when we get to the school level, parents really want the same thing for their kids at the high school level. They are struggling in how to pick it up. It's a pleasure to be with you this morning.

Fege, A., (2004). Voices from the Field. Family, School, and Community Connections Symposium: New Directions for Research, Practice, and Evaluation