

Harvard Family Research Project



The National Coalition of Advocates for Students

Capacity Building for Southeast Asian Family-School Partnerships

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National Coalition of Advocates for Students: Capacity Building for Southeast Asian Family-School Partnerships

Numerous education reform efforts endorse partnerships among families, schools, and communities to promote student success. While the idea of partnership is not new, it is yet to be achieved in ways that truly represent community voices and engage the partners to work together toward shared goals. Often, partners come to the table with widely different resources, priorities, and needs, and operate from equally divergent organizational norms and cultural perspectives. Partnership implies co-equal relations; however, the education system operates in ways that have kept parents and communities in limited decision making roles. These conditions make it challenging, though not impossible, to attain effective partnership.

The question of how to build the capacity of communities to create effective family-school partnerships is also a question of how democratic processes play out in communities, and in this case, public education. Public administration experts point to the importance of redefining roles and relationships in the process of public participation, specifically by empowering communities while re-educating public officials and working toward structural change (King, Feltey, & O'Neill, 1998). This model of civic participation also applies to partnerships in education, as illustrated in the work of the National Coalition of Advocates for Students (NCAS).

This case study focuses on the NCAS strategy to build the capacity of schools and Southeast Asian communities to build partnerships that help students succeed. Schools are generally unfamiliar with the groups that comprise the Southeast Asian population and their immigration experiences. This lack of knowledge poses a barrier to their support of students and their families. Although many Asian students are academically successful, a great deal of diversity exists within this population. Students coming from low-income and refugee backgrounds often do not fit the "model minority" stereotype. Their families have limited education and knowledge of the American school system. Families' potential for involvement is often challenged by cultural and linguistic differences as well as the lack of basic information and skills about how to participate effectively in their children's schooling. The goal of NCAS was to help Southeast Asian communities find leadership roles in education and to strengthen schools' support of these roles.

The National Coalition of Advocates for Students

The National Coalition of Advocates for Students began in 1975 as a network of education advocates to address the issues of student suspension and expulsion. Today, the 22 member organization works to improve access to quality public education among disadvantaged students. NCAS espouses the belief that all schools can serve students well and that schools must be held accountable for student performance. The organization seeks to strengthen parent roles in school governance so that parents can advocate for changes in school policy and practice. From kindergarten through grade 12, NCAS organizes students and families, focusing especially on communities of color, recent immigrants, migrant farm workers, and people with disabilities.

In 1993, NCAS began to direct its advocacy efforts to the educational opportunities of Southeast Asian students by creating the Asian Family School Partnership Project. The primary goal of the Asian Family School Partnership Project was to improve the educational success of low-income Asian immigrant students by engaging parents, community-based organizations and schools to “move towards fair, effective, and culturally appropriate programs and services” (National Coalition of Advocates for Students, 1998b, p. 1). To create and strengthen this partnership, NCAS chose to focus on site development in nine cities (Minneapolis, Philadelphia, Des Moines, Chicago, Houston, Seattle, San Diego, Richmond, CA and St. Petersburg). These sites participated in the project anywhere from three to seven years. They were chosen by virtue of their large concentrations of Southeast Asian populations.

Site Development Strategy

NCAS approached site development by working on three fronts. It gave parents the information and skills to be engaged in their children’s education. It supported the role of community-based organizations (CBOs) to broker family-school relations. It also re-educated school leaders and staff to be responsive to the needs of the Asian community. Because a national organization accumulates knowledge and experience through repeating its site development activities, it also functions as a resource for learning and improvement (Letts, Ryan, & Grossman, 1999). NCAS supported continuous site learning through its newsletter, annual conference, telephone consultations, and site visits. Through them sites gained new insights and practical steps from the national project implementation. The NCAS site development strategy and its objectives are illustrated in Figures 1 and 2.

Figure 1
Site Development Strategy

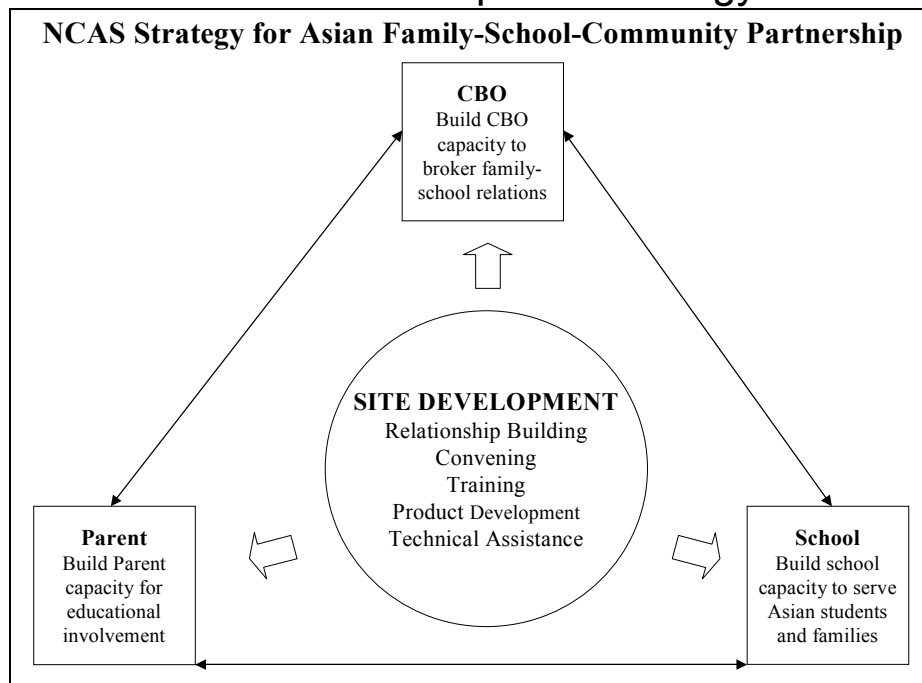
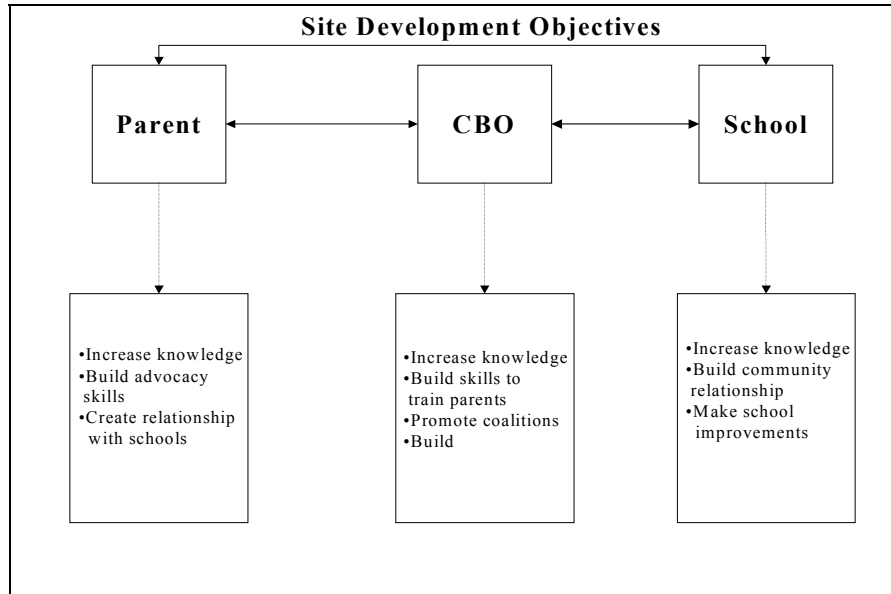


Figure 2
Site Development Objectives



Site development involved an extremely labor intensive effort and involved an interrelated set of activities that included relationship building, convening, training, product development, and technical assistance. The scope of this work demanded strong commitment and dedication from its project staff, which consisted of a project director and contracted consultants. For two years an assistant project director was hired to help with project expansion.

Relationship Building

As an outsider coming to a site, NCAS took a number of important steps to establish a working relationship between CBO leaders and school staff. First, it paid attention to selecting CBOs and schools that were ready to assume the responsibilities of engaging parents in their children’s education. This meant that CBOs showed an interest and commitment to education issues and that schools had programs to serve Southeast Asian communities and wanted to be more effective in their outreach efforts. Later, NCAS learned that it was important to add another criteria to CBO selection — although many CBOs operated as volunteer associations, it became imperative for the CBO to hire at least a part-time staff person to the partnership project.

Second, NCAS promoted project ownership by having the representatives of communities and schools identify their issues of concern. The site partners determined their priorities and contributed to the agenda of meetings and training co-sponsored with NCAS. As one NCAS report described the approach, “The project staff do not impose anything on a community, rather, the community decides what is best, and what should be their priority, and the project supports that” (National Coalition of Advocates for Students, 1999, p. 24).

While site development commonly shared the goal of equity and fairness for Asian students, the ways that the sites worked toward this goal differed widely.

Third, by adopting the role of facilitator, NCAS strengthened the capacity of CBOs and schools to negotiate with each other and to forge alliances that could be sustained beyond NCAS involvement in the community. The presence of NCAS helped to instill in schools that expertise could be found in the community. One community leader from a focus group conducted as part of this research commented:

NCAS makes our work more visible. In the past, it used to be that outsiders come and try to help this community. They may have every intention to help but they don't know how to help. Now, finally, I think the schools realize that you need to get leaders from the community.

Fourth, NCAS organized activities to build trust among school and community representatives. At the annual conference, participants spent time showing their talents in music, dance, and skits. They got to know each other as a "real person, not a school Principal or a President of an organization" (National Coalition of Advocates for Students, 1999, p. 22). Having fun together fostered good will and helped bridge the distance among the partners.

Convening

The Annenberg Institute for School Reform (1999) points out that the process of bringing people together to deliberate on issues has value in and of itself. It increases the "social capital" of the community for effective problem-solving and promotes better coordination of resources. For NCAS staff, convening was essential to relationship building. How it went about doing this is instructive, given that many in the Southeast Asian community experience discomfort and even fear when dealing with school representatives.

NCAS chose to hold initial meetings with the CBOs and parents separately from those with teachers and school staff. The parent meetings were held in a "safe space," a community setting where participants could candidly share ideas about student issues, parent involvement, and the barriers that affected parent involvement. The NCAS staff conducted school meetings to elicit the perspectives of Asian and non-Asian educators about the community they served and to understand the difficulties schools faced in their outreach efforts. Then, NCAS brought the partners together in joint meetings to talk about their issues and the ways schools and parents could better help students.

This staged approach served a number of purposes. It allowed NCAS staff to get a better handle of issues. It gave parents confidence to speak up and present their concerns before school administrators. It enabled school staff to share their hopes and frustrations and be better prepared to meet with parents.

Training

In keeping with its overall mission, the NCAS training emphasized basic educational rights and advocacy for equitable educational opportunity. Its training manual clearly states, "Inherent in the concept of partnership is the concept of equality in knowledge and status. If this is not achieved, the 'partner' with superior knowledge will inevitably occupy a controlling role" (National Coalition of Advocates for Students, 1998c, p. 1).

Parent and community training focused on the rights of limited English speaking students and the types of issues to monitor. These issues included inappropriate referrals to special

education, the denial of resources for Limited English Proficient programs, and the integration of students from LEP into the mainstream curriculum.

Examples of NCAS Training Agendas

- Training in Minneapolis dealt with legal rights and educational equity. The CBOs needed this information because they felt the Asian community was not represented in discussions about a proposed lawsuit against the school district for not meeting the needs of minority students. They sought information that would help them decide the action to take.
- Training in Des Moines dealt with the formation of multi-ethnic parent networks. The school district serves different Asian ethnic groups as well as new immigrants from Bosnia, Mexico, and the Sudan. Parents representing these diverse cultures share similar concerns regarding their children's education, language issues, and ways to maintain a cultural heritage. Both the schools and CBOs felt the need for ongoing training on strategies to bring parents to resolve these issues collectively.

Training also accommodated specific site interests and needs. By having the sites provide input into what they wanted to learn, they were better able to internalize and apply the training content areas into their work.

NCAS reinforced partnerships by providing regular and consistent training for the CBOs and schools. Through an annual conference in Boston, school teams and CBO leaders spent time learning together through listening, peer exchanges, reflecting, and arriving at consensus on action to take when they returned to their sites. They shared ideas about the implications of education policies for linguistic minorities and strategies for communicating the issues with parents.

The annual conference in Boston contained working sessions whereby each site, representing schools and CBOs, could problem-solve on common issues. For example, at the 2000 conference, the Richmond, California site representatives held an honest dialogue about outreach. To guide school efforts, the CBOs explained that parents do not attend meetings when they feel that schools do not pay attention to their advice. Parents expect immediate and tangible results. They need to see the connection between the suggestions they make at meetings and results and thus, schools need to give status updates at meetings. The CBOs also suggested that schools set up information booths at upcoming ethnic New Year celebrations, which are well attended by the community.

Product Development

From its first three years of project implementation NCAS learned that it was not enough to convene families, schools, and communities. To address the goal of educational equity among students required addressing equity issues among parents and communities. Carolyn Leung, the former NCAS assistant director, observed, "One of the biggest challenges is the disparity in the knowledge base (between schools and communities)—disparity when parents don't know their basic rights, don't have information, and don't know how to access it." To address this issue, NCAS embarked on knowledge

development and skill building. It produced a two-tiered information package for parents and CBOs. The first focused on basic school information and the second, on advocacy skills.

NCAS published a set of 14 brief articles translated into Cambodian, Chinese, Hmong, Lao, and Vietnamese. These articles were widely disseminated through ethnic media and the school and CBO sites. Some examples of the articles are:

- How do your children learn English
- How to enroll your children in school
- Gifted and talented program and Special Education
- School choice
- School testing

NCAS also produced an advocacy manual to inform CBOs on the rights of students and families and the advocacy process. The manual contains information about basic rights such as freedom of expression, the legal rights of limited English proficient students and special education students, and Title I programs. It discusses various types of advocacy as well as alternatives to suspension and exclusion

Technical Assistance

Through technical assistance the sites gained the opportunity to address their unique issues. The NCAS staff and consultants made about three site visits a year and held regular telephone consultations. The technical assistance process covered relationship-building, organizational development and educational policy, as illustrated in the examples below (National Coalition of Advocates for Students, 1997):

- Facilitating collaborative meetings among CBOs and schools
- Helping CBOs organize parent/school meetings as well as parent training sessions on student rights and advocacy processes
- Providing CBOs with technical information to help them design their partnership activities at the site level
- Assisting with the organizational development of existing or newly created parent associations
- Facilitating coalition building among ethnically diverse Asian associations so that they can function as a leadership group to bridge school and community
- Responding to CBO inquiries about education policy.

To assist schools to be more responsive to the needs of a diverse student population NCAS developed a school self-assessment tool. The tool equips teachers and school staff to reaffirm positive practices and to identify areas for improvement. It contains a comprehensive set of questions that examine access, inclusion, and effectiveness of services and programs in the following areas:

- Parent involvement
- Admissions and parent choice
- Curriculum and teaching strategies

- Student support service
- School safety and discipline
- Teaching staff
- School finances.

Site Development: Accomplishments and Continuing Challenges

Family/school partnership building in Asian communities requires all partners to become open to new terms of partnership...On whose terms will partnership exist? Whose perspective will prevail? Issues of authority and power will now have to be explored and negotiated.

– National Coalition of Advocates for Students

One way to understand the partnership-building process is through the framework of “authentic participation” (King, Feltey, & Susel, 1998). Authentic participation is the ability of citizens and communities to have an effect on decision-making processes. It involves a three-pronged approach of empowering and educating community members, re-educating administrators, and changing administrative structures and processes. This approach is reflected in NCAS activities to build the capacity of parents, CBOs, and schools to create “authentic partnership.”

Building Asian Parents’ Capacity: Education and Empowerment

Language and cultural barriers exclude many Southeast Asian parents from learning about school policies and ways they can participate in home-school activities. Even when schools inform them in their home languages, parents are frequently confused by the options that are open to them, especially in bilingual programs. Additionally, many parents defer to school authorities and have a deep-seated fear of public officials, including educators (National Coalition of Advocates for Students, 1995).

At the 1998 annual conference for CBOs and schools, community leaders expressed the types of school practices that parents do not know about or have difficulty understanding (National Coalition of Advocates for Students, 1998a):

Most of them (parents) don’t understand the meaning of the grades A, B, C, D, E, F. They may think that D may be higher level than A because they count 1, 2, 3, 4.

The parents don’t check up with their children’s homework because they think that the children already do the homework in the school.

Parents don’t know how to call the school and say, “My child is sick today.” The nurse has to call home and ask where is the child.

To address this lack of awareness and knowledge, NCAS conducted training and promoted information sharing through community meetings. Bouy Te, former project director, has said, “The project’s position is always getting more parents to speak up on all the issues, to get parents to be informed of all the issues” (National Coalition of Advocates for Students, 1997, p. 69). It must be pointed out, however, that information is internalized in part through the context in which it is transferred. NCAS worked with CBOs and parents to design training and meetings. Training sessions addressed parent concerns and meetings engaged parents in agenda setting. The relationship building process embedded

in these training and meeting activities supported parents receptivity to learn and to speak up on issues.

Through training, conducted by NCAS, CBOs and the schools, parents became aware of the importance of expressing their voice. In the focus group, one teacher explained:

We had planned to offer the after school tutorial only once a week but the parents wanted it twice a week. We had been telling them they had certain rights and certain demands they could make upon the school within certain boundaries. Because they voiced their needs, they were able to get two days of after school tutorials.

NCAS helped create ethnic parent or parent-teacher associations and supported the development of existing ones. The associations provide a structure to sustain family involvement over time. For example, the NCAS consultant in Chicago worked with CBOs to form Vietnamese and Cambodian Parent/Teacher Associations. These associations sponsored training for parents on ways to become involved with the school system. One outcome of the Vietnamese Parent Teacher Association's work was to convince a high school principal to open a special six-week summer school in English and math for Vietnamese students. This association also sponsored for three consecutive years a widely attended parent-student meeting to address intergenerational issues affecting children's schooling. To support the association's meetings, NCAS provided \$1,000 annually, a small amount that made a big impact in the community.

Educating and mobilizing Southeast Asian parents to action is a long-term process. While the NCAS made laudable progress in its sites, its staff members do not underestimate the barriers to family-school partnership. Cultural differences continually need to be addressed, even among the younger generation of parents. Many Southeast Asian parents are often reluctant to express their desires or to question school authorities. Even when teachers or administrators ask them what they would like the school to do, many parents feel that it is not their role to assert themselves.

NCAS staff members also recognized the challenges of working with communities that have a very limited understanding of concepts such as freedom of expression or of the system of children's schooling. Although NCAS took into account where parents are in their readiness to learn about school involvement, parents still found it difficult to grasp the information in the brief articles on basic school information. In training sessions, the same information had to be repeated several times in order for parents to understand the issues, and the complexity of many different programs affecting their children (e.g. bilingual education, Title1). Each training session also had to be designed as a self-contained unit to accommodate busy parents who could only attend once.

Parent-Initiated Dialogue with Schools

In San Diego, parents decided that they wanted to talk to schools about training Lao individuals to conduct Parent Institute classes in Lao, develop after-school programs for Lao students, develop information for parents on non-academic school programs, and coordinate a Lao New Year celebration. According to one community leader:

The [NCAS] project helped set up the meeting between school and parents. Before, the school district set up the meetings . . . This time, the community-based organization set up the meeting. The Lao community feels like they're part of the meeting. It's from them. They set the agenda. (National Coalition of Advocates for Students, 1997, p. 59)

This parent-initiated agenda led the school district to adopt several measures to increase Lao participation in Parent Institutes. A Lao-speaking district staff person contacted Lao parents and Lao community organizations for outreach to the Parent Institutes. Asian paraprofessionals received training to conduct the Parent Institutes and a series of sessions were held in the Lao language. The Parent Institute sessions used a Lao curriculum that was translated with the help of NCAS (National Coalition of Advocates for Students, 1997).

Building the Capacity of CBOs: From Service Providers to Advocates

Building the capacity of CBOs meant instilling in them an awareness and commitment to expand their social service roles to include educational advocacy. The CBOs were largely mutual assistance and friendship associations such as the Society of Thailand-American Friendship and the United Laotian Community Development, Inc. They were historically involved in refugee resettlement and typically provided social services. While some offered after-school programs, and literacy and English classes, they lacked familiarity with broad school policies. In many cases, their staff and volunteers, like the families they served, needed to be convinced that education is as much a family and community responsibility as it is the school's. Like the families, too, the CBO staff members and volunteers tended to avoid asserting their ideas before school officials.

NCAS, though, approached the CBOs based on their strengths and potential. Because many Southeast Asian parents do not know English and find it difficult to deal directly with the schools, working with and through CBOs is advantageous. CBOs serve as both gatekeepers to the community and resources for schools, offering the latter access to translators and venues for after-school tutoring and Asian language classes.

In its relationship with the CBOs, NCAS modeled the kind of relationship that can exist between community and school. NCAS solicited the suggestions of CBOs for its site development activities. This gesture as well as the recognition of community strengths became principles that informed the CBOs own efforts to build inter-ethnic coalitions, and in some cases, alliances with non-Asian ethnic associations. One CBO in Richmond, California initiated a meeting with Cambodian, Lao, and Vietnamese associations to address statewide issues that relate to Asian families and to combine their resources to

strengthen the Asian voice (National Coalition of Advocates for Students, 1999). As one focus group participant mentioned, "Each organization is driving its own car. We now need a carpool."

NCAS brought the CBOs together at its annual conferences so that they could network and learn from each other's experiences. An important function of the conference was to break the isolation of the CBOs and to create professional and friendship networks. By interacting with their peers, the CBO representatives experienced personal growth and gained the confidence to commit themselves to educational advocacy. The conference provided a forum where the CBOs deepened and broadened the dialogue with the site school teams and with each other. They deliberated on common problems as well as shared their successes.

Conference participation strengthened the relationship between CBOs and NCAS as well as among CBOs. This multi-layered relationship reaffirmed CBOs new role as education advocates. As one focus group participant said, "[CBOs] realize that they know how to farm and can harvest their own rice now." The CBOs also got to know various school staff members and learned to collaborate with them. One community leader describes his experience:

When I came back from the conference last year, I looked into it [education]. Then I worked on that with Dinh's [school administrator] help. Another CBO helped... I became very vocal with the community and talked to everyone who has power in order to see what we can do to help our population. We need to learn as a team. We cannot separate the CBO and school into two different components.

Given that many of the CBOs had very limited resources, NCAS provided small amounts of funds, usually \$2,500-3,000, to underwrite training and meetings. Additionally, NCAS offered assistance in fundraising efforts. For example, with the guidance of NCAS, the Houston-based CBO created an after-school program for K-12 children and obtained funding from the city to support this project.

Working through CBOs has its share of successes and challenges. The partnership with NCAS has shifted CBO awareness of expanded roles from service providers to advocates. The CBOs with strong leadership, some previous connection with schools, and financial stability have eased into educational advocacy fairly rapidly. Focus group participants explained:

NCAS was able to bring very important people from my school district to be here [annual conference] to listen to me... Before I wouldn't step in anything that goes on in the school. I focused on services for youth; anything else was secondary. Now, it's wait a minute. First of all, I need to go the school to do this before I can get a project done because if the school piece is not in place, then this project is not going to happen.

Advocacy is not only asking. It is partnership. It is awareness. It is sharing information and work.

However, some of the CBOs are fragile organizations struggling to survive. The initial assumptions that NCAS had about the capacity of the CBOs were not always born out. Leadership turnover, limited staff time, and cash flow problems resulted in uneven involvement in education issues. With the occurrence of staff turnover, the original plan for a train-the-trainer model has been carried out only in a few sites where the CBOs are comfortable at training parents. Work that began with one volunteer organization that had

no regular source of funds eventually had to be discontinued. The lack of educational expertise and resources prevent some CBOs to sustain communication with schools and deal with them on an equal basis (National Coalition of Advocates for Students, 1999). All these suggest that some CBOs will need more time and continuing support to strengthen their advocacy roles.

How a CBO Supports Family Involvement

In Chicago, month long collaborative meetings among the Cambodian Association of Illinois, NCAS, and teachers resulted in organizing Cambodian Parent Council meetings in community settings rather than at the school. The parent meetings were integrated into the Association's Sunday School Program, thus increasing the outreach for parent involvement. The input of the Association in the planning process assured the design of components to engage parents. These components included meetings held in the native language and in a community setting, and for training sessions to be led by Cambodian school staff and community leaders (National Coalition of Advocates for Students, 1997).

Building School Capacity: Re-educating Educators

Re-educating school administrators and teachers involves changing their role from professional to partner. It involves attitudinal changes so that teachers and administrators adopt positive images about Southeast Asian parents and show an interest in learning about their students' communities. These new roles also call for shared decision-making and soliciting the proactive participation of parents and community members. In the early stages of NCAS's efforts to identify schools to participate in the partnership project with the community, staff members observed that most schools offered parents passive roles and had seldom reached out to the CBOs. One of its reports states:

Watching how many school administrators resist the notion of even negligible power-sharing with parents, or listening to the low levels of expectations for parents...one quickly comes to understand the enormity of the parent empowerment dilemma (National Coalition of Advocates for Students, 1995).

Through site visits, NCAS decided to work with schools that wanted to serve the Asian communities but lacked the knowledge and skills to do this effectively. Some of the schools had already established programs for Asian families; NCAS helped strengthen their collaborative planning with the CBOs to improve school outreach. Carolyn Leung points out that NCAS helps the schools bring their parent involvement efforts to "the next level," which she describes as "activities that were not prescribed" but grew from the partnership-building process. Some examples are:

- The West Contra Costa Unified School District coordinates parent training across its feeder schools—elementary, middle and high schools—so that parents with children in these different schools attend one instead of several meetings
- The Des Moines Public Schools secured funding for Project TEACH, a bilingual education improvement program, whose design of a Parent University was based on NCAS goals for parent involvement.

The NCAS staff conducted major training sessions at the local school sites to inform school staff about Asian communities and to use the school self-assessment tool. Commenting on the need to understand the Asian community, one school representative remarked, “Ignorance is not bliss. It is agony. It causes many other problems” (National Coalition of Advocates for Students, 1998a).

Through the dialogue and learning experiences with CBOs and NCAS staff, the teachers and administrators from participating schools began to change how they related to Southeast Asian communities. Some schools invited CBOs to participate in school planning and needs assessment; others shared space and facilities for after-school and recreational programs organized by CBOs. The schools also co-sponsored with CBOs parent training sessions.

Project Director Hiep Chu says of the Chicago site experience, “School staff picked up a lot of knowledge through the conferences and meetings. Some became closer to the Asian community and even intend to reach out more” (National Coalition of Advocates for Students 1997, p. 48). One Houston principal observed greater cultural awareness created by NCAS and the CBO. She says, “They have provided some sensitivity training for our teachers and staff...so that we will not be insulting to the parents or make such mistakes as to say ‘Parents who care come to open houses’” (National Coalition of Advocates for Students, 1997, p. 48).

Engaging Parents to Implement Curriculum

At Seattle’s Cleveland High School, teachers engage Filipino parents in implementing an innovative curriculum. The school uses a fish hatchery and rose garden for a hands-on curriculum in science, language, art, math, and social studies. Filipino parents use their knowledge of tilapia fish culture and truck gardening to lead classroom discussions (National Coalition of Advocates for Students, 1997). In this way both teachers and parents share their expertise to create a rich learning experience for students.

Participating schools also began to change parts of the administrative structures and processes that posed barriers to family involvement:

- Schools in Philadelphia, Houston, and San Diego hired additional bilingual teaching and support staff
- Schools in all project sites worked together with CBOs and community leaders to plan parent meetings and training sessions and shared the agenda setting process
- Schools in Des Moines and Chicago responded to parent requests for after-school and summer school programs in the native languages
- Schools in Chicago helped organize regular meetings at community sites
- The West Contra Costa Unified School District collaborated with CBOs to produce a parent education curriculum and workshop based on a needs assessment of Laotian parents
- Schools in Minneapolis and Seattle provided opportunities for meaningful parent engagement through their science curriculum and family science sessions

Although schools have made progress in building partnerships with the community, they continue to be challenged by a number of factors. Effective parent outreach continues to be difficult even when CBOs lend their support. Some schools do not have bilingual staff or a parent center. While teachers who have been part of the project are enthusiastic advocates for Asian students and families, some of their peers show a lack of interest or resist the idea of the school's allocating staff time to develop Asian parent leadership.

Furthermore, site partnerships lack the power to change policies that come from higher authorities. For example, at the 2000 annual conference, teachers and administrators expressed concern about the implications of high stakes testing for students with limited English proficiency and the lack of support at the site level to deal with this issue.

Conclusion

The NCAS site development strategy contains important lessons for those who seek to engage families in their children's schooling. First, the strategy components—educating and empowering parents, involving CBOs, re-educating educators, and working toward administrative changes—are comprehensive, addressing the relationships and policy structures that are critical to the process and outcome of family-school-community partnerships. The strategy, however, depends on a substantial and long-term investment of human and financial resources on the part of a national organization.

A second lesson about site development is that it requires multiple types of capacity building goals and activities. On the one hand, there is the content knowledge that parents, schools, and communities need to acquire. These refer to basic educational rights, educational policies affecting minority students, and advocacy skills. On the other hand, sites have to be guided in developing and strengthening interpersonal and interorganizational relationships. Learning to communicate clearly and to work collaboratively involves a different set of skills that are crucial for sustainable partnerships.

A third lesson is that new pathways to site development evolve from a well-managed peer learning network. The national organization learns from its site experiences and shares it with other sites. It facilitates peer learning at the site level and promotes cross-site learning. When properly supported through regular communication and meetings, the learning network has the potential to grow the next generation of site level projects.

A fourth lesson is that relationship building is key to sustainable partnerships at the local level. NCAS invested in making schools reach out to “unfamiliar partners” and in engaging CBOs and parents to dialogue with schools about their concerns. Convening the partners, initiating networking activities, co-developing training sessions and meeting agendas all supported the growing familiarity among partners as well as trusting relationships.

The NCAS approach to family-school-community partnership has many commendable features. It capitalizes on the strengths of CBOs, namely, their links with the community and potential to broker relationships and services between school and communities. Site development focuses on the needs and interests of the communities rather than a preconceived agenda. The CBOs, school representatives, and parents share decision-making roles in site development activities, which builds a sense of ownership and partnership.

The NCAS strategy has wider application for partnership-building beyond Asian communities. What can be learned from its implementation is that family-school-community partnerships can work to bring new community voices and leaders to improve schools. This type of partnership needs substantial up-front capacity-building assistance to enable the partnership to “move to the next level.” If partnership is to be more than a one-time demonstration of accomplishment, it requires continuous re-engagement of the partners and the organizational resources and stability to support such dynamic interactions.

Research Method

This case study was prepared as part of the Harvard Family Research Project's technical assistance to the National Coalition of Advocates for Students for its Asian Family-School Partnership Project. The sources of information for the case study included internal documents such as grant proposals and progress reports as well as the reports and tools that were produced from the Asian Family-School Partnership Project.

In addition to documents, the author interviewed the NCAS project staff and facilitated a focus group at the 2000 annual conference. The participants included CBO leaders and some Asian school staff who were also active volunteers in CBOs. A total of 10 individuals participated in the focus groups.

As part of its technical assistance process, the Harvard Family Research Project technical assistance team held several meetings with the NCAS project staff over a three-year period. HFRP staff members also participated in the annual conferences and noted their observations and conversations with participants. All of these interactions contributed to the framing the analysis of the case study. Drafts of the case study were reviewed by the HFRP technical assistance team and the NCAS staff, whose comments were incorporated into the final report.

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Appendix A: Case Study Summary of the National Coalition of Advocates for Students

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Brief History

The National Coalition of Advocates for Students (NCAS) formed in 1976 to unite child advocacy organizations. Together, the 20-member network aims to improve the educational outcome of disadvantaged youth in the public school system. From kindergarten through grade 12, NCAS organizes students and families, with a focus on minority groups, recent immigrants, migrant farm workers, and people with disabilities. Their impact ranges from the local to the national level, shaping policy.

One national project of the coalition, the National Asian Family/School Partnership Project (NAFSPP) sought to improve the academic success of Asian immigrant children on a national scale. The needs of Southeast Asian immigrant students are often ignored, even though many come from refugee families that do not fit the typical stereotype of the "model minority." NAFSPP worked with the parents of these students and ethnic Asian community-based organizations to establish learning environments that support the children and meaningful participation of their parents. The project also helped to build the capacity of elementary and secondary schools with a large constituency of Asian immigrants.

Number of Sites

Over a seven-year period the NAFSPPP operated in nine urban sites: Chicago (IL), Des Moines (IA), Houston (TX), Minneapolis (MN) Philadelphia (PA), San Diego and Richmond (CA), St. Petersburg (FL), and Seattle (WA).

Sources of Funding

NAFSPPP received funding from the DeWitt Wallace-Readers Digest Fund in addition to public and private sources and fee for service arrangements.

Operating Budget

The cost of operating NAFSPPP was approximately between \$150,000-200,000 a year.

Organization

The Project Director had responsibility for project coordination, training, fundraising, and administration. An assistant director was hired to support expansion. Consultants were hired to work in the sites on a regular but part-time basis.

Description of Training

NAFSPP provided training to parents, public schools, and community based organizations with Asian immigrant constituencies.

Under the *training of trainer* model, NAFSPP trained CBO staff who in turn helped Asian immigrant parents to effectively support, monitor, and advocate for their student's success. First, *awareness training* covered basic information on the U.S. public school system; specific topics include discipline, enrollment, ESL and bilingual programs, parent advocacy, school choice, and special education. Then, *advocacy training* proceeded to teach parents how to achieve needed changes in school policy and practice for their children. Sessions occurred in easily accessible places such as homes, public schools, and other community settings.

NAFSPP also trained public school staff to become culturally competent and sensitive to issues of Southeast Asian immigrants. Training focused on strengthening family involvement in the schools and helping parents to overcome feelings of isolation and fearfulness, a major barrier to participation.

Technical Assistance Services

The national office provided technical assistance to sites, addressing such issues of sustainability as training, networking, funding, material needs, and language.

Technical assistance also included information dissemination directly to parents. NAFSPP provided research-based information in heritage languages, about the U.S. public school system and education advocacy. A *national media campaign* via Asian print and electronic media and publications of community-based organizations broadened parents' understanding of public schools. Publications include *School Information for Asian American Families*, a series of 14 articles to raise awareness of parents, school staff, and community members. NAFSPP publishes a newsletter *Network News*.

The NCAS web site provides information about the coalition, its member organizations, national projects and publications. Information is presented in English and heritage languages.

Evaluation

NAFSPP and its sites operated under a continuous and flexible feedback loop, consistently assessing their activities. Participating schools also undertook a process of needs assessment, reflection, and staff development.

Contributors

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