



# Family Engagement: Authentic Partnerships for Increasing Academic Achievement

Mary Cowhey (Copyright 2014)  
Webinar with NJ public school teachers  
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“The evidence is consistent, positive and convincing: families have a major influence on their children’s achievement. When schools, families and community groups work together to support learning, children tend to do better in school, stay in school longer, and like school more.”

Anne T. Henderson and Karen L Mapp

*A New Wave of Evidence: The Impact of School, Family and Community Connections on Student Achievement (2002)*

- **Some key findings from *A New Wave of Evidence: The Impact of School, Family and Community Connections on Student Achievement* (2002)**
- Students whose families are involved in their learning earn better grades, enroll in higher level programs, have higher graduation rates, and are more likely to enroll in post secondary education.
- Children do best if parents can play a variety of roles in their learning: helping at home, volunteering at school, planning their children's future, and taking part in key decisions about the school program.
- Children from diverse cultural backgrounds tend to do better when families and school staff join forces to bridge the gap between home and school culture.

# Thinking Inside The Box

- Section 1118 Title I of ESEA in 2002 (a.k.a. No Child Left Behind Act) requirements for family involvement include:
  - School and district “parent involvement policies”
  - Parent/School Compact
  - Fall Annual Title 1 Meeting
  - Spring Parent Survey
- **The Reality:**
  - Little or no funding to support parent involvement
  - Little or no pre-service or in-service training in parent engagement
  - Little or no enforcement of these requirements
  - “Compliance” often does not equal authentic parent involvement

# A continuum:

“What can the federal government mandate?” to

“What can a district do?” to

“What can a school do?” to

“What can one little teacher do?”

- Are you going against the grain? Who are your allies?
- Are your colleagues and administrators willing to think critically about the status quo?

Reflect on traditional “parent involvement activities” such as Open House, Parent Teacher Conferences , PTA/PTO

**Questions to consider:**

What are your school’s demographics (economic, racial, linguistic, ethnic, etc.)?

If participation were truly representative, for every ten families at an event, how many would be low income? Latino? African-American? etc.

Who’s participating?

Who’s missing?

Where are the low income parents of color?

Let’s listen to one of those parents, Josefina Rodriguez.

**What would participation that matches the demography of our school look like?**

As a first year teacher, I started organizing Family Literacy and Family Math Nights that were bilingual, culturally responsive, and relied on personal invitations. It worked, and I was told to stop.



# Flying under the radar:

- \* made home visits
- \*recruited parent/guardian volunteers
- \*families participated in classroom potlucks, field trips, performances, exhibitions, inquiry projects
- \*assigned “family homework”
- \*wrote a weekly family newsletter

# Observations that bugged me:

- In the whole debate about NCLB, we hear mostly from politicians, less from academics, even less from teachers, and absolutely nothing at all from the students and families who are in “the achievement gap.”
- Our district Civil Rights Committee was wrestling with the question of how to close the achievement gap, yet there were no low-income people of color on the committee.
- Our School Committee, School Committee and PTO were white and middle class although roughly half of our students were low income students of color.

# Thinking Outside the Box:

## Families With Power

*In 2007, after reading The Long Haul, biography of Myles Horton and serving for ten mostly unproductive years on the district civil rights committee I wondered:*

For years, some of my colleagues and I have been organizing family engagement activities and successfully inviting parental participation that is representative of the demography of our class and school, but it was always our agenda. *What if* (by magic or any other means) parents of students most affected by the achievement gap were empowered to organize activities that they felt would benefit their children...?

*What might that look like?*

Go to the people.  
Live with them.  
Learn from them...

Start with what they know;  
build with what they have.  
But with the best leaders, when the work  
is done, the task accomplished,  
the people will say,  
“We have done this ourselves!”

Lao Tzu (700 BC)

If you take only one thing away from this webinar today,  
make it this:

## *Really* listen to parents.

As you meet Josefina Rodriguez, Jackson St. School parent and volunteer organizer with Families With Power, in this video and the photos that follow, take notes on the key points she makes. Josefina has been organizing Family Reading Parties in her home for 6 years.



From banned bilingual literacy events to...

## Family Reading Parties



“After the reading party finishes, we have refreshments, have a conversation. We create a connection, one to the other, about issues happening to our families... so we have that connection.” Josefina Rodriguez

“The Reading Party is a stream, a river, to unite families, because at that moment that we are reading together, we all feel the same. It is not that the teacher has the power, that the parent is telling the kids what to do. No, everyone is at the same level, and no one judges the other because he pronounces the word wrongly. No, everybody is equally treated.”

Josefina Rodriguez



The reading parties are bilingual, polychronic, multi-age, active and interactive. They include children, parents and guardians, grandparents and neighbors.



“It is really interesting how the kids feel powerful, reading a book and the other people are listening, paying attention.” Josefina Rodriguez



“Every single time any of us finishes reading a book, we applaud the person. This means you did a good job, you were brave enough.”



Josefina Rodriguez

Reflection:

How do the current parent involvement activities in your school reflect the characteristics Josefina describes, or not?

The goal of Families With Power is to **grow grass roots leadership** among parents and guardians.



At the start, Kim used to say, “Somos cuatro gatos...miao!” After our first workshop, Irma Lucena, coordinator for Florence Heights, described the four new coordinators for FWP as “the four pillars that hold up the house”



“I feel proud to be a part of this group. Thanks for having confidence in me that I could be a leader. I have a reason now to fight for more than my family.”

Irma Lucena, Coordinator for Florence Heights



“If you saw me before, I was always alone. I used to be an outcast. Now I am a leader.”

Norma, Coordinator for Meadowbrook

# Big Idea:

You don't need to organize Families With Power,  
but you do need to grow grass  
roots leadership among low  
income parents of color.

It takes years to build capacity,  
so start now.

# Family, School, Community Partnership:

Some of our community partners:

Casa Latina

Center for New Americans (ELL and citizenship classes)

The Literacy Project (adult basic education)

Head Start

Early Childhood Education Department

Town Farm, Prospect Meadow Farm

Tuesday Market

Northampton Dept of Public Health

Northampton Dept of Public Housing

Food Bank of Western Massachusetts

Florence Savings Bank

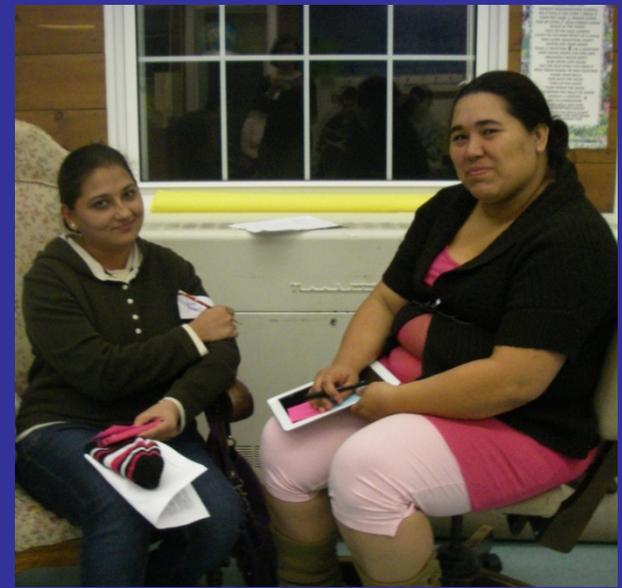
Northampton Education Foundation

Engineering Dept, Smith College

Write Angles (local writing conference)

# How Schools Work: workshops for parents new to schools in the U.S.

Connecting parents from Pakistan, Haiti, India, Puerto Rico, Dominican Republic, Uganda, Puerto Rico, France, Greece, Saudi Arabia, Cote d'Ivoire, and Ecuador.. to create community and reduce isolation.



A collaboration between Families With Power, Center for New Americans, Casa Latina, Early Childhood Education Department of the Northampton Public Schools, linked to improving student achievement, with topics like

\*How to prepare for parent-teacher conferences

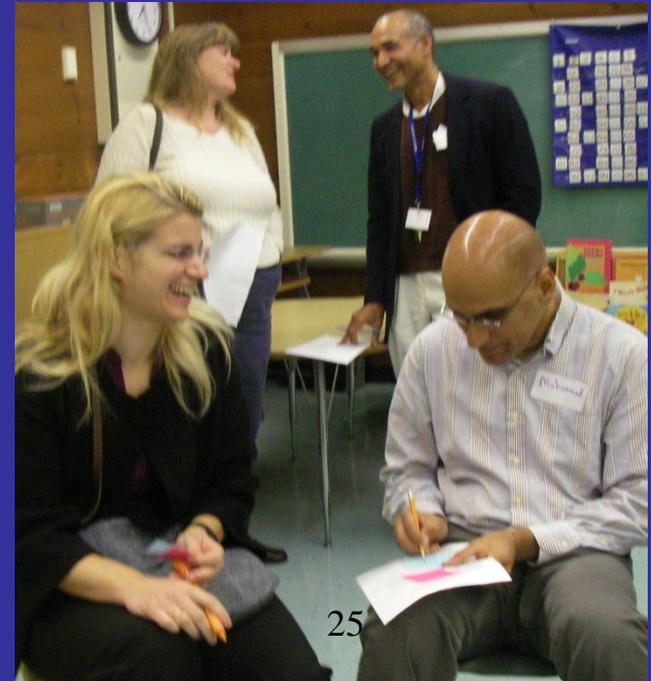
\*How to make sense of the report card

\*How are children assessed?

\*How do you get the special services your child may need?



Connecting families from Uganda and Puerto Rico, Greece and Saudi Arabia... to share wisdom and experience



# How Schools Work

develops parent/guardian leadership, participation and citizenship. Families and educators learn from each other.





# Morning Math

**Club:** grew out of Families With Power Cafe discussions, organized by parents “so we can learn how our kids learn math.”

Open to *all* students who want to have fun doing more math

You have to want to come

- Multi-age (PK-5th)
- Polychronic
- Differentiated
- Supported by PTO (materials)
- Builds community
- Develops youth and parent/guardian leadership



- arose from families' expressed concerns and needs
- introduced financial literacy
- developed parent/guardian leadership
- linked to increasing student achievement



- created dialogue about math learning
- families played math games together

- engaged in critical conversation about consumption helped stabilize families who are most at risk economically encouraged goal-setting and saving habits

\*Collaboration between Families With Power, Casa Latina, Florence Savings Bank



# Bilingual Family Math Nights now:



- critical mass of families of color
  - reduced anxiety about doing math with kids
  - openness to learning how math is taught today
- family expectation that math is something families do together



# What's different? What have we learned?

- \*personal face-to-face invitations
- \*accessible to English language learners
- \*welcomes entire family
- \*bilingual materials
- \*interpretation available
- \*“critical mass”



# leadership

- \*welcomes and respects adult learners
- \*children's enthusiasm brings parents
- \*builds relationship between staff and parents/guardians



What families do you most need to engage?

Where can you find them?

Who are the parent/guardian leaders (and potential leaders) in your school and community?

Who can you collaborate with?

What strengths can you build on?

Reflecting critically, how can you make current activities more appealing and accessible?

Where will you begin?