

# Parents and Families Working in Partnership with their School:

## Louisiana Case Study

This Case Study is drawn from a range of real life studies presented to assist in reflective learning, presented in the book *“Schools That Learn: A Fifth Discipline Fieldbook for Educators, Parents and Everyone Who Cares About Education”*. Written and compiled by Peter Senge, Nelda Cambron-McCabe, Timothy Lucas, Bryan Smith, Janis Dutton and Art Kleiner (2000) Nicholas Brealey Publishing, London.

This Case Study appears in full at pp 489 – 495. : Connections: Parent to Parent. It is told by Roland Chevalier, district school superintendent.

Readers will note that the approaches adopted successfully by the Louisiana school community bear striking similarities to the approaches of the “Families Matter” initiative – and also align closely with the indicative strategies in the Australian Family-School Partnership Framework – in particular, working with a Core Group of key stakeholders who had credibility across the community and could work participatively and inclusively with other people and agencies.

It also illustrates research which indicates that “parents decide to participate when

- they understand that collaboration is part of their role as parents
- they believe they can positively influence their child’s education; and
- they perceive that the child and the school wish them to be involved.” (1)

**A “Families Matter” Initiative information resource.**

**3 August 2005.**

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*Here is a method for tackling community problems that has worked numerous times in practice. It can help develop an entire community’s ability to learn. Parents survey each other in a way that brings people together to learn together. Every neighbourhood is distinct and unique; its people need to be involved in designing the way they help themselves. In this study the school superintendent reflects on his experience with the community engagement process. The school was in a rural district, with most families below the poverty line. This technique helped solve a problem with early childhood reading, but also gave the community a sense of identity they never had before, with a raft of significant effects.*

[The issue identified was that up to 30 percent of junior students were being held back each year because of literacy problems, and while many parents, teachers and principals were doing the right thing for slow readers by giving them a repeat year, the statistics showed that children held back were not catching up, felt disconnected from their group, were discouraged by the negative message, and showed a greater propensity to drop out later on. But it was also evident that remedial incentives to progress, including intensive support programs, could bring those children back on track.]

But that solution would not be effective unless we could address the reading problem where it started, with the youngest children. And we could not do that in isolation from the parents of those children.

### **Phase 1: Defining the Community and Assembling the Core Group**

The first step was to find volunteers from the community in the areas that most needed help. We listed all the kids that had been held back, found their home addresses, and stuck pins in a map. Where the pins clustered, we looked for key volunteers – people who would join our core group and make a long term commitment to us. Fortunately I grew up here and knew some parts very well.

We started with a core committee of six volunteers, all key stakeholders who had credibility and knew the community’s needs. It was vital to make sure not all of them were from school district administration. They included a local private day-care director, traditionally seen as a rival, personnel manager of the largest local employer, local social services office, primary school principals, and someone from the Sheriff’s office. This group became the advisory council and they organised the process.

We needed the community to bare their souls and talk about their needs, - which meant talking about their shortcomings and weaknesses. That's why it was so critical for community people, not school officials, or outside consultants, to create our survey. We brought together about forty people from every segment of the population, all invited by word of mouth, for several all-day sessions to create a questionnaire. We included business leaders, elected officials and people in the Sheriff's department.

We brought them together in a room for several hours and asked "What do you want to know from the community". Consultants facilitated, and helped refine the questions, with a draft for the group of forty to approve.

The result was several pages of questions about the things people cared about in their community and schools. What kinds of support did they need for their children? What did they think about homework? What did they want for their children's futures? What were they afraid might happen to their kids? What were they afraid their kids would do?

We didn't restrict the the content to education; we included a page of their questions about safety in their neighbourhoods, on the streets, as well as in the entire community. Several questions were written by the Sheriff's department. This ultimately led to a lot of innovations in community policing, including the placement of "school resource deputies" in our three high schools.

Even before we got any answers, the questions themselves were eye-openers for me and other community leaders: we would not have thought to ask many of them.

## **Phase Two: Community Mapping**

The "question design group" then suggested another fifty or so people as "foot soldiers" – to be trained in the interview process and go door to door. They would interview their neighbours or conduct coffee get-together in their houses. We avoided using teachers or students for this. You are more apt to tell a neighbour how you really feel.

Some of our parent interviewers had never graduated from high school. Many of them weren't confident at first, until we trained them: "This is how you introduce yourself", and so on. The Sheriff, who was getting more and more involved, provided food for the training sessions.

We also inserted a survey in the pay envelopes of the employees at the local major company, and got a tremendous response from that. Many from outside the area asked when we could conduct a survey like that in their own area!

Finally, we conducted a companion survey, with questions on the same themes, for the teachers and administrators in the schools. This brought us into dangerous territory. It turned out the teachers and parents disagreed on several key issues. Parents had much higher expectations for their children than their teachers did. Many teachers believed that parents didn't care much about schools, or didn't want to get involved. But 98 to 99 percent of the parents wanted to be involved. They felt shut out.

One question asked: "Do you believe all children can learn?" Most of the parents said yes. Sixty-two teachers said no. That was eye-opening for me: I wouldn't want my own child in the class of a teacher who doesn't believe that all kids can learn. That raised some issues in terms of staff development needs for our own faculty. The most chilling part was that parents correctly understood the teachers' attitudes: they knew that many teachers did not expect their children to graduate. In all of our planning sessions, we had never considered this.

### **Phase 3: Engaging the Community**

The consultants analyzed the data and wrote up a report. This was given to all the “foot soldiers” at this point, as this was their report, in a focus group to talk about what we had found and what we might do about it.

For example, one complaint was lack of quality child care after school for people working factory shifts. People on late shifts had no-one to help their kids with homework. People volunteered solutions. One stated a homework club in one of the low-income housing projects. Other kids ended up in a common room after school, with older kids helping younger kids, and parents supervising on a roster basis. The school had nothing to do with organising this: it all came out of the residents’ sense of efficacy – they could do something significant and make a difference.

The interaction with the community expanded our focus and direction. It made us take a hard look at what the community expected of us: our task was much more complex than we had realised. We addressed the area of reading by researching programs that worked – and zeroed in on one from Johns Hopkins: in part because that was the one the parents wanted.

We expanded our health services for children – there are now three school-based clinics, serving sixteen of our seventeen schools. We reconsidered our family centre concept – with an empty building and a renovation grant, we worked in partnership with the private day-care centres (who had previously seen the idea as competition) building on the new relationship established working together on the planning team.

Other benefits of community engagement went far beyond our original intent. A group of people from the low income housing project, trained in our method, were contracted to conduct other surveys for town planning corporations. They also started a local tutoring program, using a vacant apartment in their own buildings. We had previously offered tutoring at school – and nobody came: their project was so successful that they eventually came to us, to ask for teachers who could help, but continuing to direct and manage it themselves.

In response to the survey needs, we began running courses for parents of kids convicted in juvenile courts. The judges – one of whom was part of our survey team – began requiring the parents to attend our meetings. Many parents continue meeting even after their time is up, because it gives them a support group. The court also decided to assign all the juvenile cases to one judge, so he could provide some continuity and follow up on the kids over time. He actually came from one of the toughest neighbourhoods in the area, and was now a positive role model that kids could look up to.

Other groups of people, having met or rekindled relationships through this project, continued to meet on their own. We started holding annual interdenominational lunch meetings for all the church ministers in the district. They had never communicated with each other. There was no agenda the first year, just a chance to meet and talk. The second year we began looking for common problems we could that we could work on together. Then I took a risk and asked the ministers to come to lunch once a month at the school. Two had their own parochial schools; none had any close contact with public school. This visit changed their perception of what we were trying to do. Now we had the kind of relationship where we could invite them to visit and see what we were actually doing. We went from being competitors to allies, and we began collaborating on some projects, including some of our staff development.

## Making it Work in Your Community

Doing all this was very difficult for me at first, because I had to listen and not speak. This is a tough skill for a superintendent to acquire. I had to learn to be open to suggestions and prepared for criticism, because the community might not necessarily think that my answer would be the right answer. And I had to realise I could not be the one to do everything – sometimes I had to learn to support projects that other people were running.

I also learned, all over again, the value of close relationships with other members of the community. The sheriff and I have a strong personal relationship; we now combine our efforts and run an alternative program for expelled students from his facility. He provided the building and two full-time deputies; we provide the teachers and the desks. Skilled prisoners from the gaol work on building projects at the schools in the school holiday breaks – and the whole community benefits.

We have similar relationships with other community and business leaders. The meetings run well, I think, in part because we came together over this community enquiry. One committee member is the local firm's Personnel Director. At one of our community engagement meetings she said: "You know, I like these meetings. This is the first group I've worked with that actually gets things done".

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This material is drawn with minor abridgement from the case study provided by Roland Chevalier, district school superintendent, St Martin district, Louisiana. In ***"Schools That Learn: A Fifth Discipline Fieldbook for Educators, Parents and Everyone Who Cares About Education"***. Written and compiled by Peter Senge, Nelda Cambron-McCabe, Timothy Lucas, Bryan Smith, Janis Dutton and Art Kleiner (2000) Nicholas Brealey Publishing, London.

Note (1): For background research and discussion, see:

**Deslandes, Rollande** (2001). *"A Vision of Home-School Partnerships: Three Complementary Conceptual Frameworks"*. Published in: "A Bridge to the Future: Collaborations between Parents, Schools and Communities" edited Smit, f; van der Wolf, K & Slegers, P: at: <http://www.its.kun.nl/web/publikaties/pdf-files/rapporten/aBridgetothefuture.pdf>

