The mission of the Public Education Network is to create systems of public education that result in high achievement for every child.

The Network works to educate the nation about the relationship between school quality and the quality of community and public life. Equal opportunity, access to quality public schools, and an informed citizenry are all critical components of a democratic society.

High-Achieving Schools In Low-Income Communities

Increasing the involvement of caregivers, parents, and families in their children’s education is a key to improving the academic success of our nation’s public school students. The positive impact of family interest and participation in schools is well documented. However, more opportunities for meaningful involvement are needed, and many barriers still remain. A recently released study by Public Agenda found that most teachers rate parental involvement at their school as “fair” or “poor.” In particular, educators and other practitioners continue to struggle with how to involve all parents in supporting all students’ high achievement. Organizations like local education funds (LEFs) focus attention, support, and resources on communities where student achievement is often low, stresses on families are high, and schools lack the basics.

But what does “involvement” mean? How can parents and other family members with limited resources of money, time, and formal education be equipped to grapple with the myriad issues that affect student achievement and overall school performance?

During 1998, the Public Education Network forged a partnership with Kraft Foods and member local education funds to explore key questions about family involvement. The result of this effort was the creation of a variety of local strategies to support high student achievement in low-income schools.
Goals and Strategies

The grant from Kraft Foods, Inc. assisted in reviewing and documenting the Network’s capacity in the area of family involvement. Matching grants to four local education funds were made to support nearly a year of planning, implementation, and documentation. At the national level, the Network created partnerships with other organizations and experts concerned with family involvement in low-income or low-performing schools.

Local education funds are the strength and vitality of the Network. For more than 15 years, LEFs have engaged parents in improving public education. Several LEFs—among them Atlanta’s APPLE Corps—were founded specifically for the purpose of providing information about school issues to parents. Interest in this initiative among local education funds was high, attracting applications from nearly half the Network’s membership. After an extensive review process, four LEFs were chosen based upon their ability to represent the demographic diversity of the Network, their strengths related to data gathering, their proven capacity in community convening, and their skills in sharing public information widely. The sites include:

- APPLE Corps in Atlanta, GA
- The Charlotte-Mecklenburg (NC) Education Foundation
- Paterson (NJ) Education Fund, and
- The Portland (OR) Public Schools Foundation

Choosing only four sites was a challenge. However, the review process allowed the Network to review and document a rich array of proven family involvement strategies tested by LEFs around the country. Each site was required to outline a scope of work that involved identifying local barriers to family involvement, exploring community assets to address those barriers, and developing strategies to link increased involvement with increased student achievement. Network grants were matched by local sites. The combination of national grants and local fundraising lent credibility to local efforts. Jerri Haigler with the Charlotte-Mecklenburg Education Foundation (CMEF) reported that as a result of national and regional support for their work, “Our board is seeing the real impact family involvement can have on student achievement, and so is the business community.” Cynthia Guyer and Holly Pruett of the Portland Public Schools Foundation (PPSF) noted that being part of a national initiative strengthened collaboration with a variety of family involvement constituents: PPSF’s own foundation board members; school district and local school leaders; the district’s new parent/family involvement office; and city and county officials.
Role of Research and National Models

Qualitative research, a review of the Network’s capacity, and an examination of existing models for strengthening parent/family involvement were important at both the national and local levels. The site selection process allowed PEN’s national office to gather a body of data about LEF experiences working with families in school and community settings. Special tools were created for involving parents and caregivers. Data were gathered and analyzed from a variety of sources. New relationships among school and community constituents were developed. Technology was used to disseminate and gather information. A strong focus was placed upon linking program work with policy change. Each site was required to review its own work and examine the unique context for family involvement in its community.

At the local level, LEFs were able to dedicate staff time and other resources to discovering and documenting assets and needs in ways that captured the attention of their most important constituents—students, parents, educators, elected officials, and business leaders. CMEF used focus groups with parents, educators, and non-parents to explore the findings of its annual survey about public understanding of education issues. PPSF conducted extensive focus groups and interviews in 12 high-poverty schools. PPSF also synthesized national research, which has been analyzed and compiled into a final report. The Paterson Education Fund is conducting—for the first time in four years—a systematic assessment of its Right Question Parent Training Project.

Numerous models for involving parents are remarkably similar. Many are based on the research of Joyce Epstein and the Johns Hopkins Center for School, Family, and Community Partnerships. Epstein, the National PTA, and Portland, Oregon’s RMC Research Corporation all describe the importance and value of:

- Creating open, two-way communication
- Providing education for parents
- Encouraging the involvement of school volunteers
- Supporting learning at home
- Engaging families in decision making and advocacy, and
- Creating school/community partnerships

While most parent involvement efforts are focused on improving student success, not all are designed to lead to high student achievement in a standards-driven environment. These efforts are not designed to explore specific strategies for dealing with low-achieving schools and low-income families. However, as reflected in local implementation plans, some involvement models did provide a starting point for the four LEFs’ efforts.

“Many parents are willing to get involved, but they don’t seem to have the tools, the resources, or the support to be focused on what to do to help increase student achievement.”

Cynthia Guyer, director, Portland Public Schools Foundation

[Image of two adults and a child]
Helping Parents Support High Standards

Because of the structure of this initiative and the nature of the communities LEFs serve, the four participating sites were able to use three strategies for engaging families in raising student achievement: national models, local research, and the development of new involvement frameworks. For example, APPLE Corps designed a three-part workshop series that helps parents understand concepts like “grade inflation” and “performance assessment.” This was accomplished through hands-on activities such as laying out potatoes on a bell curve and then discussing which spud is an “A” or an “F.” The APPLE Corps series moves on to talk about standards and then specific academic content and skills. These workshops were delivered in four schools, three of them predominantly low-income and two of which are also low-achieving.

Similarly, the Charlotte-Mecklenburg Education Foundation is co-sponsoring an intensive training opportunity for parents of at-risk students through the North Carolina Education and Law Center. This special training helps parents improve their understanding of a range of education issues from parent/teacher conferences to Goals 2000.

Through its CHALK Project (Creating High Achievement Levels for All Kids), the Charlotte-Mecklenburg Education Foundation also developed a three-point continuum defining an involved parent. CMEF also published a series of print ads and handouts showing, “A dozen ways to be a coach, advocate, and leader in your child’s education.” These ads include a range of school, home, and community activities. CMEF also developed an ad for a more general audience describing and defining ways to volunteer in the public schools. As the name of the project indicates, activities are intended to ultimately affect student achievement, school performance, and community support for public schools.

The Paterson Education Fund also linked their initiative to an ongoing effort. Their Right Question Project is designed to build parent skills and comfort with investigating how to help their children learn. In Paterson and other urban school districts, interest in standards and school reform is high as a result of a recent New Jersey Supreme Court decision that determined that legislative remedies for unequal funding in the State of New Jersey were unconstitutional. Other new legislation requires schools to chose a “proven” whole-school reform model. Rosie Grant, program director, notes that the Right Question model is highly adaptable. Parents learn in a school context, but quickly begin using the questioning strategies to negotiate other systems such as family and youth services, and the courts. Kraft Foods has added value to local efforts by enabling the LEF to dedicate staff time to supporting the project trainers, most of whom are volunteers. The Paterson Education Fund has also developed evaluation instruments and learning strategies that show “basic,” “better,” and “best” implementations of the project components. Because of Paterson’s local success with the national Right Question Project model, other area districts have requested training from the LEF. Such requests invite questions about what it...
takes for small grassroots organizations to bring such efforts to scale.

Deep cuts in Oregon’s education budget over the last six years have increased public scrutiny of school reform efforts and placed significant attention on implementing high standards. The Portland Public Schools Foundation enjoys support for its public schools that is rare in urban districts. Middle-class parents are still choosing the city’s public schools for their children. Ninety percent of eligible students are enrolled in the Portland Public Schools. At the same time, the community is engaged in a school funding struggle. Oregon’s new state standards are high, but resources are inadequate to meet them. While citizens value the schools, morale is low. In this environment, says PPSF’s Holly Pruett, “Teachers and principals can understandably see parent involvement as another unfunded mandate, creating more work and higher stress.” Kraft Foods has enabled PPSF to dedicate staff time to talking with parents and educators about best practices and barriers at the elementary and high school levels. PPSF’s presence in the schools, their relationships with city and county officials, and their links with newly-formed chapters of the Industrial Areas Foundation and Parents for Public Schools are helping shape a future strategy focused on student achievement. The unique challenges of Portland’s high-poverty schools encourage the public to perceive PPSF—a relatively new organization—as a citywide resource for innovative parent involvement efforts.

Common Threads
Dr. Dianne Mancus, the executive director of APPLE Corps warns, “There are certain lessons across each of our schools. But in each one you have to act like a school person, not a system person. You have to be part of each community.” Despite these differences, many similarities exist among the LEF sites. One is the importance of context—school funding, superintendent turnover, state or district standards, judicial and legislative decisions, demographics, culture, and other community conditions that vary from place to place. Another point of connection is the importance of research and data gathering. Here value is found not only in the findings produced, but also in the discovery process and relationship-building activities involved. A third common thread is the need for dedicated funding and staff time devoted to involving families and engaging other community constituents. All of the participating sites linked the Kraft Foods initiative with ongoing community engagement efforts. In the case of APPLE Corps they built upon an existing technology initiative, as did the Paterson Education Fund when they linked with their Family Friendly Computer Project.

The ongoing process of implementation heightened the visibility of each LEF and enhanced its reputation as a provider and trusted resource for parent and family involvement.

Coach (koch) n. 1. an instructor or trainer. 2. someone who works one-on-one with a child. 3. AN INVOLVED PARENT.

Advocate (ad’ve kit) n. 1. one who supports or stands up for something. 2. a parent who works with his or her child’s teacher and principal to ensure academic success. 3. AN INVOLVED PARENT

Leader (le’ der) n. 1. a person who gives direction or guidance. 2. a parent who works with school staff and other parents to provide quality education for all children. 3. AN INVOLVED PARENT

A dozen ways to be a coach, advocate, and leader in your child’s education

1. Talk with your children about their school day. Find out what they learned, what homework assignments they have and what they liked about school.
2. Check homework assignments daily. Praise your children for their success and encourage them in areas of difficulty.
3. Let your children know that you’re proud of them. Acknowledge their academic strengths.
4. - Tell your children the importance of education. Promote regular attendance, respect for teachers, paying attention in class.
5. Establish a relationship and strong lines of communication with your child’s teacher and principal early in the school year.
6. Let your child’s teacher know about health and family issues that may affect their performance in school.
7. Attend PTA meetings, school events, and parent-teacher conferences.
8. Talk with your child’s teacher about test results. Understand what the tests are about and how you can help your child achieve academic success.
9. Volunteer to serve on a school committee, PTA board, or school leadership team. Ask your school staff about ways to volunteer that meet your work schedule.
10. Solicit support from your workplace or local businesses to bring volunteers or other resources to your school.
11. Become familiar with issues that can affect the public education system—know the Superintendent and School Board, become informed about plans for new schools and maintenance of old schools, be informed about bond referendums.
12. Encourage other parents to be coaches, advocates, and leaders in education.

“Every time we do something related to parents, whether it’s hands-on or other kinds of support, when you see the excitement it helps you to really know that what you’re doing is worthwhile.”

Jerri Haigler, project director, Charlotte-Mecklenburg Education Foundation

The ChALK Project
Creating High Achievement Levels for all Kids

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Lessons Learned

Beyond the results of local efforts, the Kraft Foods initiative yielded a number of lessons and practices that can help other communities interested in designing successful initiatives.

- Be creative and flexible about how “involvement” is implemented. Design strategies appropriate for school, home, and community settings. Know parents’ schedules and other commitments so that events and meetings can be scheduled at convenient times. Recognize that parents will make a variety of levels and types of contributions, and honor what each is able to do.

  “Every time we do something related to parents, whether it’s hands-on or other kinds of support, when you see the excitement it helps you to really know that what you’re doing is worthwhile. It makes it easier for parents who are new to this or have barriers to see that it doesn’t mean you have to be at school every day to be an involved parent,” said Jerri Haigler, project director, Charlotte-Mecklenburg Education Foundation.

- Time is a precious resource for both parents and educators. Community-based organizations can provide the planning, training, research, and logistical support that make it possible for parents, other family members, teachers, principals, and paraprofessional staff to maximize their involvement.

- When planning workshops or other activities, take care of the basic needs of participants. Provide food, child care, a comfortable and accessible setting, and appropriate materials.

  “If you want people to come, serve food,” says Dr. Dianne Mancus, executive director, APPLE Corps. “We always have food and we always have child care. You can’t do this work and tell people to leave their kids at home.”

- Use multiple outreach strategies and contacts when you communicate with parents. One time or in one way is not sufficient. Use peers and community leaders for face-to-face, personal recruiting whenever possible.

- Engage parents in substantive, complex issues in ways that respect what they know and assume that they can learn at high levels.

- Use everyday language and concepts to “hook” participants. Connect new learning to already-known information. Build on what is happening in the community and the school.

- Create a culture of support and inquiry using publicity, media strategies, and training workshops.

- In school settings, getting the support of the principal helps to emphasize the importance of the event or activity. Parent leadership is also critical.

  “How does the school define new roles for parents around helping their kids succeed?” said Cynthia Guyer, director, Portland Public Schools Foundation. “We have so many assumptions about what poor parents care about and can do. We need to realize that parents and families care deeply about creating high-performing, high-achieving schools for all kids.”

Future Directions For the Network

The family involvement work of these four LEFs—like that of many others in the Network—is deep and rich. Focusing on standards, a topic that can be difficult even for seasoned educators, encourages LEFs and other community-based organizations to design strategies for communicating complex, sophisticated information over time in ways that are easy for the average citizen not only to understand, but to
support. Charlotte offers one model in the design of CHALK, which focuses on four areas: raising community awareness through a media campaign; increasing parent “know-how;” promoting employer support; and developing parent leadership. Not only focusing on what parents know and are able to do, but also making specific suggestions for how other community members can be involved with children and schools, begins to create a culture in which those schools are more highly valued. The mission, vision, and broad constituency of local education funds make them ideal conveners of such efforts.

A few areas deserve further exploration, including: using the Internet and other technology to reach some families; engaging the talents of other caregivers and the school community; shaping partnerships that build the capacity of both teachers and families; and developing more varied local frameworks for community involvement in helping all students and all schools achieve at high levels. The issues involved in bringing these efforts to scale—suggested by the attention Paterson has attracted from other districts, the wide audience for Charlotte’s media efforts, and the partnerships forged in several sites to enable more effective program delivery—are critical in making effective strategies accessible to communities across the nation. More remains to be done in terms of both research and practice. Nevertheless, through the Network’s partnership with Kraft Foods, these four LEF’s and their local partners have made a substantial contribution. As Jerri Haigler notes, “Every parent wants the best for their child. Some parents just know the process better and know what questions to ask. This initiative really helps in that area by assisting all parents in learning how to get the best for their child.”

For More Information On Family Involvement

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Public Education Network online
www.PublicEducation.org
Public Agenda online
www.PublicAgenda.org
Department of Education’s Partnership for Family Involvement in Education online
http://pfie.ed.gov/


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Cynthia Guyer, director, Portland Public Schools Foundation
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