

## *Strategy 2: Building a support infrastructure*

### **Action Steps:**

- Commit resources to family-friendly system development
- Hire a family coordinator/liason with a clear role and responsibilities
- Create a family center in your school – a place for activities and resources that support the family role in child development and education
- Plan for and commit resources to development of a family-friendly staff

### ***Howard Lewis Parent Center***

**The Buffalo Public Schools' Howard Lewis Parent Center** in Buffalo, NY, was the first parent center in New York and one of the first in the country. Begun in 1989, the center now offers services and activities for more than 44,000 students and their families, according to Supervisor Bonnie Nelson (personal communication, August 12, 2002). The center is housed in downtown Buffalo in the Buffalo Urban League Building. It has a staff of 22, including 7 specialists in adult and early childhood education, a full-time teacher who teaches computer skills, and teaches from the public school system who serve as mathematics, reading and language specialists.

The center includes two computer labs with more than 50 computer work stations and a discovery room where a number of hands-on learning activities are offered. Additionally, the center has 60 portable computers that may be loaned to families to work together at home with their children.

Except for adult education classes and Title 1 sessions, all learning activities at the center are planned for parents and children to participate in together through the use of college tutors, computers, and family literacy activities. Core academic and other classes in areas such as art, health, exercise, sewing, and music are provided.

Transportation to the center is provided for parents through the district's school bus system. Buffalo Public School teachers may also schedule classroom visits to the center. The Parent Center is open year-round, except for school holidays, from 8 a.m.-7:30 p.m., and 8 a.m.-3:30 p.m. during the summer. In addition to this center, each school building in the district includes a parent room or parent area where families can meet or complete volunteer projects.

Rita Fraiser, Principal of the BUILD Academy, says the Howard Lewis Parent Center is valuable to the district because it *"provides a supportive environment for families."* The center also *"enables teachers to extend the learning experience of their students to help motivate and challenge them toward higher academic achievement"* (personal communication, September 12, 2002).



Encouraging family involvement in schools requires the creation of an infrastructure to support these efforts. This infrastructure typically includes developing a family center, hiring a family coordinator, and insuring ongoing resource commitments to maintain and/or expand family involvement activities.

### ***Family centers***

*The Family Center is both a place and a program.*

Rush-Henrietta Family Center, West Henrietta, NY

Creating family centers in school buildings and school districts is one significant way in which schools can involve families in the education of their children. Offering families a special “place of their own” in schools recognizes the “overlapping spheres of influence” that both teachers and parents share in children’s learning (Hiatt-Michael, *Promising Practices*, 2001; Johnson, 1993). Establishing family centers sends families a very positive message that they are valued as partners, belong in the school, and should feel welcome there (Lueder, 1998; Moles, 1996).

### ***Family Support and Resource Center***

Howard County Public Schools’ ***Family Support and Resource Center***, located in Columbia, MD, focuses its services on helping families of students with special needs, including fostering partnerships among parents and educators. “*We are a safe haven for parents,*” said Parent Coordinator Tonya Lewis (personal communication, Oct. 8, 2003). The center offers a variety of services for families, educators, and community members, including:

- *Learning materials for home use*
- *Individual counseling for family members*
- *Advocacy for children and families*
- *Individualized Education Program (IEP) assistance*
- *Special education information and resources*
- *Lending library of parenting resources and educational games*
- *Printed information about parenting children with special needs*
- *Educational displays*
- *Accessing community services for families*
- *Networking and support through discussion groups*
- *Training opportunities on child development, parenting skills, and understanding the special education process (Partners for success, 2003)*

Parent Sarita Bradford, a frequent center user, indicates that having a child with a disability is “*a crisis in itself,*” especially if a parent does not know where to turn for information or support. She describes the center’s services as “*awesome.*” “*It’s a comfort to know there are people I can go to who are knowledgeable, empathetic, and encouraging when I need information and support,*” she said (personal communication, October 12, 2003).

“A well-designed parent center can help a school’s learning environment in numerous ways” (Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction, *Organizing*, 1996). Family centers are “accessible, safe, and friendly” places for parents to gather to share a cup of coffee and talk with other parents or teachers in a casual setting (Johnson, 2000). These centers also

serve as the “hub of information” for parents and as a primary “link” to community resources (North Central Regional Educational Laboratory, *School Strategies*, 1996). Family centers are places where families can go for training, support, resources, services and even, in some centers, food, clothing, and shelter (Lueder, 1998, p. 142). The success of family centers “hinges on ownership” (Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction, *Organizing*, 1996). “Parents, especially those who have not felt comfortable in school, need to feel the center belongs to them.” Family centers that welcome all family members, including children of all ages, grandparents, and other family members, display respect for “the family as a unit,” which is especially important to families with a “collectivistic value orientation” (Trumbull, Rothstein-Fisch, Greenfield, & Quiroz, 2001, p. 43).

### ***Planning Family Centers***

**Location:** Family centers “come in all shapes and sizes” (Lueder, 1998, p. 143). They may be as small as a corner of the school library that houses parenting resources and as large as several rooms with multiple purposes. Many centers begin small and then expand as more resources become available (Lueder, 1998). Although most family centers serve individual schools, some larger centers serve entire districts.

### ***Mobile Parent Resource Centers***

A familiar sight in Syracuse, NY, neighborhoods is the school district’s P.U.M.P. (Power Unit for Motivating Parents) bus that reaches out to parents even in the evenings and weekends during non-winter months. Staffed by the **Syracuse School District’s** parent advocate, Michele Abdul Sabur, and three parent liaisons, the bus “*seeks out parents where it can find them*” in the community, whether at a Native American festival, a community shopping area, or outside of city hall (Abdul Sabur, personal communication, August 20, 2002). As if they were shopping in a bookstore, parents make choices for their children (infants-12<sup>th</sup> grade) as well as themselves from a variety of free, new, and diverse books. Home learning activities for various grade students and local agency information are also available. The focus of the project is to support at-home learning and assist parents to help their children meet the New York State learning standards in literacy and math.

Ms. Abdul Sabur indicated that in order to create greater awareness of the neighborhood resources available she and the staff often collaborate with community agencies to provide “*one-stop shopping*” for parents who visit the bus. “*It’s been wonderful what we’ve learned from the families, what they are looking for,*” she said. “*It really debunks the myth that people don’t care about their kids’ education*” (Nolan, 2001). Superintendent Dr. Stephen C. Jones says the P.U.M.P. bus “*is a valuable mechanism by which we have realized two vital components of our district’s Family and Community Involvement Policy — home-school communication and learning at home*” (personal communication, August 28, 2002).

The P.U.M.P. bus served more than 4,000 students and parents during the 2000-2001 school year and 4,860 during the 2001-2002 school year, according to Ms. Abdul Sabur (personal communication, August 21, 2002). The bus operates on an annual budget of approximately \$13,000, excluding donations from local bookstores.

Mobile parent centers are also operating in Virginia and California. The **Greensville County Public Schools** Mobile Parent Center serves parents in the rural Emporia, VA, area. The center includes two classrooms, various kinds of equipment, and both print and non-print parenting resources (Margaret Lee, personal communication, August 12, 2002).

The **Fresno Unified School District** operates a “*Family Center on Wheels*” that offers childhood health services, family support, and family education for preschool children and their families. The parent mobile visits neighborhood parks, businesses, and churches three days a week (Fresno Unified School District, *Parent Mobile*, 2002).

**Funding:** Funding is a major challenge for family centers. Most centers are funded through some combination of donations, often from business partners, community agencies, school funds, Title I funds, and fund-raising activities in support of the center. A family center does not need a large budget in the beginning. “What is more important is a firm commitment to the idea and a willingness to explore all possible sources of support” (Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction, *Organizing*, 1996).

Staffing is the primary expenditure of centers, followed by resources. Business and community donations such as books, supplies, food, and equipment (refrigerators, computers, photocopy machines, etc.), as well as volunteer time from family and community members can all support the development and maintenance of family centers.

**Staffing:** “The center staff, whether volunteer or paid, will be the heartbeat of your family center” (Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction, *Organizing*, 1996). A family center can be staffed by paid employees or volunteers, or a combination, although a full-time, paid coordinator is an asset because the position is a demanding one that requires specialized expertise, and having consistency “promotes stability and status in the position” (Johnson, 2001, p. 92). Title I funds may be used to pay the salaries of center employees, including a coordinator. Ideally, parent center coordinators should be drawn from among the families whose children attend the school.

**Autonomy:** Administrative support for family centers is essential, although centers need an identity of their own. Policies regarding independence and confidentiality need to be developed with parental collaboration from the beginning. Issues related to the respective roles of the administration and the family center, confidentiality, information sharing, and resolution of family-related problems need to be addressed (Donald Lash, personal communication, October 22, 2002).

**Activities:** The programs and services provided by family centers vary considerably from school to school. Both the scope of services to be offered and how they will be delivered need to be determined. A wide range of activities, services, and resources may be coordinated in family centers. These include:

- books, videos, and computers that parents can take home to use with their children
- a lending library of print and non-print parenting resources, such as:
  - books
  - videotapes
  - educational games
  - software
  - activity kits
- educational toys and books for visiting preschool children
- information resources, including school and community resources and services, volunteer opportunities, employment opportunities, transportation, immigration laws, voter registration, college admissions, financial aid, etc.
- child-care services
- after-school and evening tutoring programs
- parent classes and support groups
- parent-child informal education activities
- crisis intervention/family counseling, auxiliary support services such as food and clothing banks, health screenings, housing assistance, legal aid, job counseling, and transportation assistance

(Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction, *Organizing*, 1996; Lueder, 1998; Children’s Aid Society, 2001; Massachusetts Department of Education, 2000; Hiatt-Michael, *Promising Practices*, 2001; Berger, 1995; Rockwell, Andrew, & Hawley, 1996.)

**Evaluation:** Evaluation of family centers should be an ongoing process focused on continual development and improvement. Types of data that may be collected and analyzed include:

- number of participants using the center
  - number of parents enrolled in classes offered at the center
  - number of volunteers
  - number of parent contacts made through the center
  - number of requests for services
  - number of referrals to the center made by school staff members and community organizations
  - evaluations of center activities and programs
  - interviews with family and community members
  - oral and written comments from participants, school staff members, and the community
- (Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction, *How Should*, 1996)

The Rochester City School District Action Center requests that parents fill out an “exit survey,” which ensures continual feedback on center services and issues of concern to parents (Rochester City School District, 2002).

### ***Family coordinator/liaison***

The family coordinator/liaison plays a vital role in coordinating family involvement activities for the school.

The coordinator’s salary in many schools is paid through Title I funding. The coordinator’s responsibilities may include:

- planning and coordinating outreach activities to families
  - recruiting, screening, orienting, and matching parent volunteers with opportunities
  - planning and coordinating family education events
  - planning and coordinating orientation sessions for new families
  - arranging for translation services in the native language of families
  - serving as a “bridge” between families and schools
  - making home visits to families
  - producing newsletters and other communications to publicize activities
  - coordinating the evaluation of family involvement activities
- (Johnson, 2001; Moles, 1996; U.S. Department of Education, *Family Involvement*, 1997)

### ***Resource commitment***

For family involvement efforts to be effective, they need to be considered a priority by schools. Administrators must provide positive leadership to develop partnerships with families and communities and be able to translate talk into implementation, commitment, and resource allocation (Caplan, 2001). Improving family involvement may require changes in resource allocations, time commitments, and priorities. Administrators leading these efforts “will need to monitor and nurture the effort continuously” (p. 9).

*While family involvement is crucial, it is not easy to achieve.  
The key ingredient of success is commitment.*

(Caplan, 2001, p. 10)

**Staff time:** In addition to schools needing a full-time family involvement coordinator, the school faculty and staff need to be given time and training to enable them to work effectively with families (Ballen & Moles, 1994). Support from administrators is necessary to allow team members the time to meet, plan, and conduct activities associated with family involvement (Epstein, 1995). Training is especially needed to enable faculty and staff to work effectively with the diversity of families represented in American schools today, including how to make home visits, facilitate effective Individualized Education Program (IEP) meetings, create a welcoming school environment, and recognize the many ways that families are involved in their children's education.

**Resources:** Most family involvement programs are supported by a blend of federal, state, and district funds. Federal funding is available through Title I, Title II, Title VII, Goals 2000 and other federal programs offered by the U.S. Department of Education. Another funding strategy is for school districts to offer a mini-grant program to teachers who propose and implement effective family involvement approaches in the classroom.

Epstein and Clark (2000) surveyed members of the National Network of Partnership Schools to determine current funding sources and levels for school, family, and community partnerships. Responses from 94 schools, 25 districts, and 7 states indicated that members were tapping into a variety of sources to fund family involvement programs during the 1996-97 school year, including federal funds, state and district grants, and funds from local or other organizations.

Individual school budgets to support partnership activities ranged from under \$100 to \$70,000, with an average of \$4,065. School district spending on partnership activities ranged from under \$100 to \$1.2 million, with an average of \$85,013. Funding for school partnership efforts primarily came from bilingual education, drug prevention, Even Start, Goals 2000, special education, state compensatory education, Title I, Title VI, Title VII, principals' discretionary funds, PTA/PTO, and general funds. Seven districts reported awarding grants to schools, ranging from \$1,000 to \$6,500, to support projects for school, family, and community partnerships.

### *Questions for Principals Concerning Family Involvement:*

- How do I view the role of parents in the operation of the school and in their children's education?
- Do I talk about family partnerships? Where and when? What expectations are placed on teachers regarding partnering with parents?
- Does the school's budget include funds (preferably a line item) supporting family involvement?
- Is there a person on staff dedicated to increasing family involvement in the school?
- To what extent are parents included in school decision making? Are parents invited to curriculum meetings? School improvement planning teams? Professional development workshops?

(Caplan, 2001, p.10)

