

HORACE

The Family and Essential Schools: Mobilizing Democracy Toward Equity

Students do better in school when their families get involved, all the research shows. But unless schools send clear messages of respect, families who don't fit the mold may never trust educators enough to speak up or show up.

BEFORE THEIR NINTH GRADE children began school this fall, the parents, grandparents, and guardians of students at Chicago Vocational Career Academy already had a pretty good idea of what they were in for. During one hot August week, they and their charges had attended classes, met teachers, and been thoroughly initiated into the ways of this 2,400-student Essential school with its eight mini-schools.

"There must be some mistake," one grandmother remembers thinking about the summons to summer school. "My Carolyn is an excellent student." But four years later, as Carolyn heads off to college, she recalls how helpful it was to learn just how and why students at CVCA would be treated as active workers, coached by their teachers in the academics that tie in to their emerging career interests.

Getting family members to spend several summer days at school isn't easy, principal Betty Despenza-Green acknowledges. "I will call and arrange it with their employer if I have to," she says.

Whether on the gritty streets of Chicago or in the leafy bastions of suburbia, no one quarrels with the truism that family involvement in the schooling of children makes an enormous difference to their success. Regardless of their socioeconomic status, students whose families are involved with their

learning have higher academic achievement, many empirical studies show, and children who are furthest behind make the greatest improvement. Programs to foster parental partnerships have been a dime a dozen since federal Goals 2000 legislation put them on the priority list for school improvement.

But under that apparent unanimity lies an uneasy clash of interests—between teachers and parents, between privileged and less privileged parents, even between reformer and conservative—that shows up in subtle ways in virtually every aspect of school life.

And because so many students these days do not have "families" in the traditional sense—or are parents themselves—schools must also rethink the ways they construct the relations between home and school.

To reflect on the purpose and practice of parent-school relations, in fact, necessarily raises hard questions for Essential schools about equity, democracy, and the nature of inquiry in a learning community.

Of seven teachers HORACE interviewed in depth about their professional lives, for example, most fell uncomfortably silent when asked what kinds of relationships they have with parents, and how those relationships contributed to student achievement (Volume 14, Number 4). "It's something I want and intend to do," one said. "But in the

Ten Principles of Parent Engagement

At the Metropolitan Regional Career and Technical Center (the Met) in Providence, Rhode Island, Elayne Walker of the Big Picture Company has been working out ways to help draw in families to every aspect of school life. Parents help plan their child's individual "learning through internship" program, help assess student exhibitions three times yearly, and buddy up with new parents to initiate them in school practices.

Celebratory events, trips, and training programs on anger management and conflict resolution also involve them closely; and many serve as workplace mentors to Met students. From the experience, Walker has compiled the following list of what makes for effective parent-school relations.

1. **Assume all parents to be caring and concerned about their child's education and welfare.** The attitudes with which teachers and administrators approach parents are very important to building the necessary relationships to foster student achievement.
2. **Acknowledge and use as a resource the fact that parents are a child's first teacher, and encourage that dynamic in their education at school and at home.** Teachers should share insights about the child's school life with parents and also get input from parents about how students learn.
3. **Recruit families to enroll in your school and involve other family members in student work.** When parents start their relationship with a school knowing what's expected of them, they are more apt to make the commitment to fulfill those responsibilities.
4. **Make a commitment on both sides that school personnel and parents will work with each other at set intervals.** To develop partnerships with parents, both sides need consistent learning plan meetings or conferences to address student work or needs.
5. **Vary the opportunities to involve families, and communicate a menu of opportunities.** Because of varying life styles, family members need many opportunities to take part in the life of the school. Helping serve lunch, or attending board meetings or teacher meetings, family activities, and school celebrations create ways to do so at any hour of day or evening.
6. **Accept suggestions for parent-driven ideas and activities and support them whether they happen or not.** Parents who suggest activities, meetings, classes, or trips need encouragement and support. If a plan is not completed, offer to include that parent in the next school-sponsored event.
7. **Develop a database that lets you know the profile of all your families, individually and collectively.** This will help you generate telephone lists or group parents by expertise, interest, or geographical area, which helps in communicating with parents and in finding volunteers.
8. **Allow parents to create a presence in the school.** Designate a room or area in the school where parents can drop by and have coffee or chat with teachers and students.
9. **Make clear the principal's expectations for teachers in regard to family engagement.** For example, the expectation might be that all telephone calls from parents will be returned within 24 hours, or that parent requests be honored within a week.
10. **At the end of the school year, introduce the concepts in your family engagement plan for the following year.** Make plans to start the year with a big event, outlining explicit expectations for both school and parents.

More information about the Met can be had in The New Urban High School: A Practitioner's Guide, available from the Big Picture, 275B Westminster Street, Providence, RI 02903; tel. (401) 456-0600.

face of everything else, it falls to the bottom of the list."

That happens partly because dialogue with parents can be a struggle over turf and expertise, some have observed, especially as Essential high schools make changes like heterogeneous grouping and project-based learning. When families have fixed their sights on the top of the college admissions heap, they can wage fierce battle against strategies that don't support a "sort and select" curricular bias. Whether their concerns surface in battles over tracking, a push for "skill and drill" teaching methods, or an over-emphasis on test scores, they put a thorn in the sides of many Essential school people. "There is no national organization called Rich Parents Against School Reform," charges Alfie Kohn in a passionate essay in the April 1998 *Phi Delta Kappan*, "because there doesn't have to be."

'Parent as Worker'

But are pushy parents the real problem, or do such tensions arise because social class gives some an edge when they advocate for their children with persistence and skill? What would our schools look like if all parents got the encouragement and coaching to ask for evidence of their children's learning, or for the courses that will support their future success? What would happen if schools learned to listen attentively to all parents and consider them experts on their children no matter what their class, color, or culture?

This can happen, as the Right Question Project (RQP) has proved in workshops with poor and minority parents in places like Jefferson County, Kentucky, which is home to a large number of Essential schools. (See sidebar, page 4.) "The process is simple," says Dan Rothstein, who directs the project. "But just like Essential schooling, it requires a shift from the habit of delivering information to parents

toward *facilitating inquiry*." He grins. "It's 'parent as worker.'"

Simple it may be, yet educators' commitment to the habits of inquiry often stops at the schoolhouse door, notes Seymour Sarason in his book *Parental Involvement and the Political Principle* (Jossey-Bass, 1995). Like most professionals, he says, educators usually fail to recognize their clients as assets, in this case bearing precious parental insight into how their children learn best. Ironically, he observes, teachers are often in the same position relative to school administrators: outsiders who are looking and wanting in, while a "superior" tells them what to do. If power shifts toward a dialogue among equals, in both cases problems arise.

Even less well recognized is the gap between the family cultures of many students and the remarkably constant institutional culture of American public schools—where middle-class Anglo-European habits dominate everything from teacher-student talk to lesson plans and report cards. Over the genera-

tions (mostly through the benefit of formal schooling), some families have accumulated resources—child-rearing styles, economic supports, even "school savvy"—that give their children an advantage on the turf of public school classrooms. Even the way such parents talk to their kids lines up with what the schools expect and reward.

But other families—especially those in which formal schooling does not go back for generations—approach school without the particular resources that match the school's culture. Does the school, then, do some adapting of its own, learning to use different families' cultural habits as assets, not obstacles, in their children's learning?

Not likely, says a substantial research base that begins with sociologist James Coleman's 1966 report for the U.S. government on families and schools. Families may range all over the map in their backgrounds and cultures, Coleman's data reveal, but the school culture rarely bends to meet them. Yet Essential schools have much to gain by paying attention to such matters. In many Southeast Asian immigrant families, for example, students across the grade levels learn important group study skills by doing homework together in the evenings around the dinner table. A 1992 study of 200 Indochinese refugee families by Nathan Caplan, Marcella H. Choy, and John K. Whitmore observed that as older siblings helped younger ones, they seemed to "learn as much from teaching as from being taught."

Listen and Learn

To correct that imbalance, some bold Essential schools have moved involvement with families to the front and center of their mission. At the Metropolitan Regional Career and Technical Center (the Met) in Providence, Rhode Island, parents help plan their children's individual

learning goals in thrice-yearly team meetings with a teacher-adviser, a workplace mentor, and the student. They keep in touch via phone calls and notes as the term progresses, and then they show up at the culminating exhibition to help assess the student's progress. "You have a say in what you feel they have and have not learned," one parent told researchers from the New Urban High School project, to which the Met belongs.

The Met's highly individualized design virtually requires such an intimate partnership with parents to succeed. Each group of about 100 students stays with a team of teacher-advisors, who supervise a changing mix of internships and seminars that take off on student interests and needs.

In a very diverse urban community like Providence, it's a tall order to get family involvement on this scale. But when parents know from the start, as in this case, that the school depends on their active involvement, and when they receive a steady flow of invitations to help, they are much more likely to participate, a 1997 review of research by Kathleen Hoover-Dempsey and Howard Sandler showed. Without such explicit prompting, "the best and most well-financed school efforts to invite involvement are likely to fall frustratingly short of success," the study concludes.

At James Lick Middle School in San Francisco, Project Respect sets out to cultivate good relations with the families whose children come to Lick from neighborhoods near and far under the city's desegregation plan. "Action groups" facilitated by parents and including teachers, the principal, and kids work through the problems that can come up when school staff and families come from diverse cultures or races.

"Lots of school structures and policies have a middle-class bias," says Brad Stam, a veteran faculty member. "For example, parents told



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Parents as Educational Advocates: Learning to Ask the Right Questions

"We all want our children to get a good education," says the facilitator in the Right Question Project's two and a half-hour workshop to build parents' skills in naming issues, framing questions, and making action plans about their children's education. "But sometimes going to schools can be pretty intimidating, and knowing what to ask can be frustrating." Rather than providing information or answers, this workshop coaches parents to learn from each other's knowledge and experience, and develop the skills to ask different types of questions and analyze the answers they get. The workshop proceeds as follows:

Sharing Experiences. (20 minutes) In small groups, parents share with each other memorable experiences from when they were students; then each group chooses one to share with the larger group. The large group reflects on why such memories are important to the educational lives of their children.

Two Core Questions. (10 minutes) The group discusses what they mean by the phrase "to learn," then talks about the difference between "What is my child learning?" and "What does my child *need* to learn?" They reflect on why looking at these questions might be important.

Your Child's Learning. (20 minutes) The group offers ideas about what "curriculum" means to them, then reviews its dictionary definitions. Next the facilitator passes out cards on which are written the same four simple math problems (addition and subtraction of single-digit numbers). "Imagine that this is part of a first-grade math curriculum, the work your child is expected to do in math in first grade. What questions do you have?" After questions are recorded, a different color set of math cards are handed out with the *same four problems*. "Imagine that this is part of a twelfth-grade math curriculum, the work your child is expected to do in math in *twelfth* grade. What questions do you have now?" Last, simple "report cards" are handed out, with course grades of "A" in English, math, social studies, science, and "other." "Imagine that this is the report card your child brings home in twelfth grade. Keep in mind what we just showed you about what your child is learning in twelfth grade. What questions do you have now?" Finally the group offers answers to "How does the math and report-card activity relate to the questions 'What is my child learning?' and 'What does my child *need* to learn?'" The section concludes with a discussion of what participants have learned.

Questions As Key to Involvement. (20 minutes)

Considering the previous activity, the facilitator asks, "What are some questions you could ask *every year* to make sure your child is learning what he or she needs to learn?" After recording these, parents form small groups to choose one question to ask more questions about—brainstorming

for questions, prioritizing them, and branching out from them. After the large group discusses the value of that activity, small groups go on to review their questions and sort them—into those that can be answered with a "yes" or "no" (close-ended questions) and those that cannot (open-ended questions). In the large group, they record some advantages and disadvantages of each kind of question, and discuss which may prove more useful in which kinds of situation. Then, in small groups, they practice *changing* their close-ended questions into open-ended questions. After reporting out two examples of this to the larger group, the whole group discusses why they have been focusing on asking questions, and what they have noticed about the process of doing so.

What's a Parent to Do? (30 minutes) The group begins looking at the roles parents can play in their child's education, first by looking at the words *support*, *monitor*, and *advocate*, giving their own definitions and relating them to dictionary definitions. Parents then offer some specific examples of ways that they can *support* their child's learning to help ensure the child is learning what he needs to learn; ways to *monitor* that the child is making progress in his learning; and ways to *advocate* for their child's educational needs. They talk about the differences between each of these forms of action. Then, in small groups, they come up with two questions they could ask to support their child's education, to monitor the child's progress, and to advocate for the child's educational needs. After parents report back and discuss these, the facilitator says, "The role of supporter is one that parents often play. What happens to a child when no one is monitoring his or her progress? What happens to a child when no one is advocating for his or her educational needs?"

Taking Action. (25 minutes) Here parents come up with concrete ways to involve themselves in their child's education. In small groups, they record on prepared newsprint one way that they will, *this month*, support their child's education, monitor the child's progress, and advocate for the child's educational needs. On another prepared sheet of newsprint, they record one way that they plan, *this year*, to support their child's education, monitor the child's progress, and advocate for the child's educational needs. In closing, the facilitator asks the group to list the activities they have done in the workshop, then records their answers to the questions "What do you understand now that is different from before?" and "Based on that understanding, what are you *capable of doing* now that is different from before?"

More complete materials on this and other Right Question Project workshops can be had from RQP at 218 Holland Street, Somerville, MA 02144; tel. (617) 628-4070.

us that holding our after-school tutoring at the school instead of out in the neighborhoods made it hard for many kids to attend." Conducting routine procedures only in English also created a chilling effect with Spanish-speaking parents in the counseling and main offices, action groups said. "It can be as simple as how we answer the phone," says Stam, "or what kind of materials or help we offer."

Now the staff regularly looks at family relations as part of the work of student learning. All teachers confer twice yearly with students and their guardians about the work in student portfolios, and intensive intervention takes place when needed. Monthly parent activities, tied to student performances, happen out in the neighborhoods rather than always at the school.

No matter how sturdy the culture of parent involvement in a school, it requires careful tending to last through the fast-changing generations of a school community. And since for 150 years schools have been in the driver's seat telling less well-educated parents what to do, the habit of equity between teachers and families must emerge piece by piece.

Brooklyn parents in a school network affiliated with the Center for Collaborative Education, CES's regional Center in New York City,

Charter Schools: Parents as a Survival Strategy

Over 700 public charter schools around the country have started because active parents joined with teachers and community partners, getting state or local permission to operate outside district constraints. Once these schools open, they depend more than most on their parents for help in key startup areas. Though vital, such help can also raise problems in every area from management to equity.

Many charter schools, for instance, require parents to sign contracts promising their participation in areas ranging from governance to volunteer work. But does this practice implicitly or explicitly select out families whose ways of contributing do not fit neatly into the expected model, or for whom such expectations create an undue burden? Do contracts create a socially controlling "compliance" model that regards parents not as equal partners but as consumers?

With or without such contracts, studies show that parents in public schools of choice have a higher investment in participation. A study of California charter schools sponsored by the Southwest Regional Laboratory showed that 50 percent more parents attended evening student performances than in the comparable public schools, roughly twice as many helped out or taught in classrooms, and four times as many did committee or governance work. Teachers in these schools did far more than their counterparts to involve parents at home by such means as creating homework that required parental involvement, though regular public schools had more outreach efforts like parent drop-in centers or classes. (Even in the charter schools, the numbers of parents involved were fairly low; only a small minority could get even a quarter of parents to help in a classroom, for example.)

For more information see Henry J. Becker, K. Nakagawa, and R. G. Corwin, "Parent Involvement Contracts in California's Charter Schools: Strategy for Educational Improvement or Method of Exclusion?" April 1995, Southwest Regional Laboratory; and Abby R. Weiss, "Going It Alone: A Study of Massachusetts Charter Schools," March 1997, the Institute for Responsive Education, Boston, MA.

created a "parent development" task force—not just to help them organize, but to study their patterns of interaction with each other and with teachers, and to pass along their expertise to new parents. At

the end of the year they could share their work with the network community, proud to have helped a new ethic emerge that went beyond "volunteering" to powerful democratic organizing.

One Classroom's Research Turns Up Many Ideas

Working with a researcher from Partners in School Innovation, the teacher of one sixth-grade class at San Francisco's James Lick Middle School took a very close look at what worked best in communicating with the families of her students. By interviewing every parent in depth, the two came up with a set of issues that routinely got in the way of such relations. Since then, teachers at Lick have begun to share with each other their own experiences with "best practices" in family relations:

Bill Scott's students used a poem about a hardworking father as inspiration for thank-you notes to their own parents. "Three parents called me to thank me, and one kid

said his mother started crying for joy," he reports.

Jose Montano shows up at students' homes to give positive feedback to their families, especially when he is concerned about a student. "Kids usually respond well and their work improves a great deal," he says.

Students in another class write weekly letters to their parents including their descriptions of the week's work, and "what I really learned a lot about," "something I'm really proud of," "how I think I can do better," and "the way I think you can help me." They ask the parent to write back about "what you would like to know more about my work in school," or add other questions or comments.

What Parents Say; How Staff Might Respond

Parent-teacher action groups working with Project Respect in San Francisco came up with these notes on their experiences in school:

Parents say: I am an intelligent, confident person in my life. Why do I feel intimidated when I visit my child's school?

School staff could ask: What elements of interactions with parents could make them think and feel this way? How would you like a parent to feel after a conversation with you?

Parents say: I was helping out and I made a flyer for the school. I made an error in grammar and a teacher put it on the blackboard and corrected it in front of everyone.

School staff could ask: How do we demonstrate respect for parents? How will we know if parents experience our efforts and actions as respectful?

Parents say: When I have a meeting about my child, all we talk about are the problems. They say that if my child does not change now, his whole future will be messed up.

School staff could ask: When a child is challenging, how can we talk about the problem without blame? If we paint negative pictures of a child's future, what does that say to and about the family of that child?

Parents say: I am a young African-American woman and when I go to the school on days that I don't work, I wear casual clothes. People look at me funny, they talk down to me, and they don't take me seriously.

School staff could ask: What assumptions do we make based on appearance? How are these shaped by the person's race, class, or gender? How do we want people to feel about coming to our school?

Parents say: I have a loud voice and I speak my mind. When I go to school I always feel like I have to "tone it down." I can't be expressive. I have to accommodate the teachers' ways.

School staff could ask: Are there rules for how people should act in and around school? Who sets them?

Trust Builds Success

Such trust among families that their voices will be respected at school has an enormous effect on whether students succeed, research by Frederick Erickson and others shows. But poor and minority students often come to school already deeply distrustful of the institution and their prospects, notes Yale psychologist James Comer, whose School Development Program partnered with the Coalition of Essential Schools, Harvard University's Project Zero, and the Education Development Center in the ATLAS Communities project.

Schools won't help these students succeed by trying to "change" their families to conform to school expectations, much recent research shows. But if they know their students well, as CES's fourth Common Principle asks, they can build bridges to the home cultures through adapting classroom work and teaching styles. Just as important, they can work to develop a shared view of the purpose of schooling among teachers, administrators, parents, and children.

The Bay Area Coalition of Essential Schools models this approach by drawing parents into regular community conversations about actual student work and the learning needs of students. In the current climate of high-stakes testing, such conversations can prove an important reality check for schools, research shows. In one Colorado district that had experienced a backlash against the kind of performance assessments Essential schools prefer, 77 percent of parents told researchers that they learned the most about their students' academic progress from talking with their teachers, a 1995 study by Lorrie Shepherd and Carribeth Bliem found. Only 14 percent said they found standardized test scores "very useful." And when they saw graded samples of student work,

parents greatly preferred them to multiple-choice test questions as a means of determining academic achievement.

These conversations can help balance the power held by parents and school people. "Why shouldn't parents be as accountable for educational outcomes as educators?" asks Seymour Sarason. "What are the dangers when only educators are accountable?" Parents of all backgrounds, he says, will generally agree that the purpose of school is to motivate students to continue to explore, finding answers to the questions, issues, and possibilities that matter to them. The first step in altering power relationships between school people and parents, he urges, should involve coming

Questions Parents Can Ask about School Equity

- Does your child's school communicate with parents in their home languages?
- Does your child's school involve parents in decision-making about how to run the school?
- Does your child's school work with community groups on school and community events?
- Does your child's school keep you well informed about his or her behavior and progress in school?
- Does your child's school keep you well informed about school events?
- Does your child's school hold programs for parents on educational and parenting issues at times and places convenient for parents?
- Does your child's school involve parents in everyday school activities?

From the Mobilization for Equity project, National Coalition of Advocates for Students, 100 Boylston St., Boston MA 02116-4610; tel. (617) 357-8507.

together to establish that common ground.

A K-12 Pathway for Parents

Elementary schools typically involve parents in the work of the school more than do high schools, where they are often relegated to booster clubs and back-to-school nights. So as more elementary schools join the Coalition, they have important wisdom to share about making families "essential collaborators."

At Kettering Elementary School in a diverse working-class suburb near Ypsilanti, Michigan, a multi-age program for grades one to three encourages parents to work in the classroom as well as with the child at home. For the five student-led conferences she holds with parents each year, says teacher Lana Tatom, she has 100 percent participation; and she augments the monthly parent newsletter with phone calls and home visits. The school's media center is open to parents and students on Tuesday nights for activities or computer use; parents also come to special nights focused on reading and writing, math, and science—often with a \$2 spaghetti dinner.

At Puesta del Sol Elementary School in Rancho Rio, New Mexico, teachers Monica Osborne and Lisa Moore are videotaping parents, teachers, cafeteria workers, and others as they read books aloud to children. "Not all our parents get to spend the evening with their children," says Moore, so the tapes create a kind of extended family of caring adults who will read to them.

But of all the moments when a guardian's presence at school is needed, probably the most crucial in terms of equity is eighth grade, when key academic choices for students' high school years get made. The advantages of social class weigh in heavily at this point, research shows: College-educated mothers are far more likely to choose college-preparatory courses for their

Surveying Parents About Their School

One Essential high school designed a yearly parent survey to help its faculty monitor and improve their work with students. The results inform the teachers' summer planning for the next year's program, and also form the basis for parent forums at which families help sort out school priorities for hiring, resource needs, and areas that require special attention.

Excerpts from the survey follow; for a fuller version, see the CES Web site (www.essentialschools.org).

CURRICULUM

- ❖ How well informed are you about your child's academic experiences?
- ❖ How much is your child's experience at school contributing to increased skills in the following areas? [Lists academic areas]
- ❖ Has the school provided an appropriate level of challenge to your child in the following areas? [Lists academic areas.]

STUDENT WORK

- ❖ Is your child being asked to do meaningful and worthwhile work?
- ❖ How able is your child to explain to you the concepts he or she is exploring through school work?
- ❖ Does the work reinforce your child's individual strengths while providing opportunities for him to work on relative weaknesses?
- ❖ Are the parent-teacher-student conferences effective in establishing and reviewing goals for your child's learning?

TEACHING AND LEARNING

- ❖ Is coursework well structured and paced to support your child's learning? [Broken down by academic area and grade level.]
- ❖ Does your child's school work encourage him or her to take an active role in his or her learning?
- ❖ Is school work prompting your

child to explore new areas?

- ❖ Does your child receive thoughtful coaching and instruction in the classroom?
- ❖ Is your child well known by at least one of his or her teachers or advisers?

SCHOOL CLIMATE

- ❖ Has anything hindered or discouraged your involvement as a parent at the school? If so, please describe.
- ❖ Has your child developed new positive relationships with peers in the last year?

INFORMATION SOURCES

- ❖ Do you *get* the Announcements sent home with students weekly?
- ❖ Do you *read* the Announcements? If not, why not?

ORGANIZATION, GOVERNANCE

- ❖ How well does the school communicate with you about your child's work? [In conferences, phone contact, assessments, etc.]
- ❖ How well does the school communicate with you about school decisions, news, and educational issues?
- ❖ How well does the school calendar meet your family's needs?
- ❖ Are you aware of the following opportunities for input into school decisions that affect you and your child? [Lists opportunities.]
- ❖ Which of these opportunities have been most satisfying and useful?
- ❖ How many opportunities have you had to give feedback to the faculty on their work?
- ❖ What else would you like us to know about your own or your child's experience at the school?

(Answers are on a five-point scale from "Not at all" to "Very [much, well, etc.], as well as "not applicable/don't know.")

For More Resources

As well as consulting the CES Web site (www.essentialschools.org), schools can find a rich source of information on promoting democracy and equity through family involvement in the 1997 book *Urgent Message: Families Crucial to School Reform*, by Anne C. Lewis and Anne T. Henderson, available for \$14.95 from the Center for Law and Education, 1875 Connecticut Avenue NW, Washington, DC 20009; tel. (202) 986-3000; e-mail: clcdc@erols.com

children, no matter what the students' grades have been previously. Recognizing the risks if no one pays attention, Arkansas now requires parents to meet with the student and counselor at that point and make a four-year plan. And more Essential schools are charting high school course selection patterns and working early on intervening to yield more equity among students.

Once students are in high school, their parents can also be important resources for children not their own. Many serve as men-

tors, for instance, in the Essential schools that now incorporate senior projects, workplace internships, or other community-based learning into the curriculum. (See HORACE, Volume 14, Number 1.) Others help coach students for such activities as mock trials, or assess their work in public exhibitions. And they are often eager to participate in study groups about Essential schools' approach to teaching and learning. The schools in CES's Independent Cluster have parent education committees that meet often throughout the year, then gather at Cluster meetings to share their experiences and ideas.

By these means and many others, Essential schools have long sought collaboration with parents. (See Horace, Volume 9, Number 5.) But as the Coalition's focus on democracy and equity grows sharper, more member schools are making conscious efforts to hear, respect, and involve parents in the high quality education to which every child has a legal right.

Such change involves the entire educational system. Without explicit university support for Essential school ideas and practices, privi-

leged parents will continue to block reforms they see as risking college admissions. Unless teachers are educated in parent relations, they will continue to mistake advocacy for interference. Unless administrators and policymakers join parents in discussing actual student work, a focus on raising standards will remain abstract and useless.

"Why would we want parents to be involved?" the Right Question's Dan Rothstein asks. "What does it mean for students, teachers, and parents if they aren't?" As Essential schools begin to explore these questions, democracy and equity both grow in strength. □

Let Us Hear Your Voice

You can lend your own voice to the Essential School conversation about family involvement, by going to the CES Web site at

<http://www.essentialschools.org>
It contains the text and research citations for this issue, as well as more resources on family-school relations; suggestions as to how to use this HORACE as a tool for further discussion with teachers and the public; and the opportunity for an electronic conversation about these issues.



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