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HORACE

Essential Collaborators: Parents, School, and Community

You can't start too early involving the community in Essential School change, experience shows. Only by joining the dialogue about tough problems will all parties begin to take part in their solution.

BY KATHLEEN CUSHMAN

THE CONYERS, GEORGIA BOARD of education was in a state of siege. The district's new Salem High School had opened in a cloud of glory, its commitment to Essential School ideas endorsed with all the enthusiasm befitting a brand-new venture with high hopes and expectations. But barely a few months later, a small and vociferous parent group was turning up the political heat—demanding a return to the good old days of tracked courses for "gifted" students, and calling for the board to cancel all connections with the Coalition of Essential Schools. "Things got pretty hot," drawls Salem's Assistant Principal Toni Eubank. "These parents were convinced we were trying to turn their kids into little Northerners and Communists."

Alarmed, the high school faculty met to consider what to do. In the excitement of innovation, had they forgotten to keep including the school board and community in the school's conversations about new ways? How challenging *were* their courses, when rhetoric turned into reality? How could they ensure success for every child and also maintain the high standards everybody wanted? As they struggled with these issues in the soul-searching months that followed, Salem High School's staff backtracked, sometimes painfully, to repair community relations that had gone sour with neglect. A year later, this Essential school's philosophy has solid board and parental support, and the faculty is united, Eubanks says, as it has never been before.

Involving the community in the process of change may be the single most important element in Essential School success. Certainly it is the most commonly overlooked, in an era when conventional hands-off attitudes toward education are giving way to consumer advocacy and school choice. Schools that have long defended against "outsiders" trespassing on educational turf now face a climate of accountability that can turn hostile in the flash of a political eye. Where once a school's purview was bounded by geography, no longer can its constituency—or even its role in that community—be so easily defined. Finally, this country's growing diversity raises the additional challenge of bringing poor and minority children from broadly diverse family situations into the educational mainstream.

Research into the effects of parental involvement shows clearly its benefits for students at every level. Long-term studies published by the National Committee for Citizens in Education (based in Columbia, Maryland) indicate that schools with all different types of parent programs have realized immediate and positive results, including higher achievement levels, decreased operating costs, increased attendance, and reduced levels of at-risk behavior. At the secondary level, parents prove harder to draw in—partly because they lack

the time and confidence to do so, researchers speculate, and partly because high schools (and their adolescent students!) are not inclined to welcome them. Yet without their solid support along with that of the larger community, any thoroughgoing changes in curriculum, pedagogy, and assessment have a poor chance of taking hold.

Where schools have met this challenge head on—bringing parents, students, citizens groups, and educators together to share ideas in new ways and old—experience shows that change goes farther, faster, and deeper. Consider these examples from three widely different Essential schools:

• Five "focus groups" of townspeople met this spring with trained market-research professionals in the middle-class Hudson Valley school district of Croton-Harmon, New York. The focus group research method, in which small groups answer carefully worded questions designed to pinpoint public opinion, is widely used in business and politics to target and refine new products from laundry detergent to deficit reduction plans. But soap wasn't the subject here; these consumer-citizens were grappling with what they wanted their school's graduates to know and be able to do, and just how they might judge that.

• On a wintry weekday morning students from all over New York City streamed into University Heights High School, an alternative school occupying a big concrete building at Bronx Community College. But a dozen or so parents showed up as well, to trade insights about themselves and their kids over bacon and eggs in an advisory group breakfast. A mixed group of University Heights parents, students, mentors, and teachers routinely hash out issues like course offerings or service apprenticeships around a conference table on schoolday afternoons. "I don't like my momma running into me in the halls this way," one girl wisecracked at one of these meetings, and everybody laughed.

• In a city with enough magnet schools that almost any student could go elsewhere by choice, Baltimore's Walbrook High School has put down sturdy roots by making school traditions part of the neighborhood way of life. At the end of every summer Walbrook throws a picnic to send off its new graduates, and every Christmas recent graduates gather at school for a "Roundtree" where they share the experiences of their first post-secondary fall. When students seek out remedial help through a regular SOS (School on Saturdays) program, younger siblings are invited along—to throw a ball around, swim in the pool, work in the computer center, and start a connection with Walbrook that may continue through a lifetime.

Schools like these are fast abandoning the tradition that parents and community members are a factor to "deal with" in special situations, and starting to treat them instead as essential collaborators in the move toward change. Those who once believed teachers needed more time to understand and buy into Essential School ideas before they broached them publicly now say they regret the wait. Trouble brews, veterans observe, when schools spring surprises on their communities; when all major stakeholders grow used to working together, in contrast, even dissenters feel their voices are heard. As one superintendent put it, "We need to bring the community into the loop—*yesterday*."

Some Suggestions for Bringing the Community to School

- Sponsor evening study groups where parents can explore the same educational issues teachers and administrators are learning about— integrated curriculum, advisories, heterogeneous grouping, exhibitions.
- Have public exhibitions of student work, formally presenting the best projects before the community. Make sure student work actually addresses important questions in rigorous ways; weak presentations trivialize Essential School ideas. Invite community members to serve as a panel of judges, especially when their expertise makes that particularly relevant.
- Redistribute money to pay parents modest hourly fees to help as classroom aides. They can work individually with students to keep them up to speed where necessary in difficult readings or projects.
- Take parents, students, and school board members along to symposia and conferences on important change topics. Supply good readings on school reform to everyone who shows interest in running for the school board.
- Don't explain—experience! Get parents and community members into the classroom to actually try out the same kinds of assignments their kids are being asked to do. Some schools have "family math nights"; others get adults exploring essential questions in collaborative groups.
- Some "choice" schools require parents to attend teacher-parent conferences if the student is to remain enrolled. Many also insist students be present at conferences, as the key players in their own education.
- Advisory groups spur parental involvement, because concerned parents can contact one person who knows their child well, not several who don't. Many schools have regular "advisory breakfasts" where parents come in for coffee and conversation about (and with) their kids.
- Invite small groups of half a dozen people influential in the community to meet with the principal to share their perceptions of student learning. Church leaders, higher (or lower) education people, businesspeople, and civic leaders appreciate the attention to their concerns.

Pay Now or Pay Later

Too often, school change veterans observe, the community becomes drawn into Essential school change only when organized opposition arises. Typically, the challenge comes from any of several directions:

- Parents of students who have succeeded by conventional measures, who often oppose heterogeneous grouping and alternative assessment for fear standards will grow lax.
- Community members who perceive, in the Coalition's focus on depth over breadth of coverage, threats to special interests like athletics or the arts.
- Parents of special education students, who fear performance outcome standards may label their children as failures.
- Tax-limitation citizens groups, protesting expenditures on education.
- The religious right, objecting to an inquiry-based curriculum.

Whether or not those fears have any basis, Essential School proponents can virtually count on these interest groups to raise critical voices, school people say. Some of them—the religious right is an example—may present such unyielding opposition to progressive educational ideas that outright struggle for political control is inevitable. In other cases, though, what schools do to draw dissenters into a two-way conversation about change may mean the difference between progress and deep frustration on both sides.

"The choice is between developing a communications strategy up front or going back to retrofit one later," says Marjorie Ledell, a school board member in Littleton, Colorado who has worked on community involvement issues with the joint ReLearning initiative of the Coalition of Essential Schools and the Education Commission of the States. "You pay now or you pay later. And everybody knows it's more expensive to retrofit something than to design it right from the start."

Ledell, who frequently consults with school districts embroiled in controversy over school change, argues that opponents of Essential School ideas are often better organized, use simpler language, and appeal more directly to people's concerns for their children than do most reformers.

"Schools feel handicapped in the face of all this," she says. "But all of us have access to the democratic process—and educators have communications skills they sometimes forget to use. We just need to stop using jargon. We need to start making clear and specific links between school reform and the thing all parents want—that their children demonstrate success at meaningful challenges."

The first step in that process, experience shows, is to recognize just how legitimate parents' concerns really are, and in fact how schools themselves have shaped them through past practice. "In the past we've given parents a standard of excellence that relies on ability grouping and college admissions," says CES Director for Schools Bob McCarthy. "We shouldn't pull that out from under them without honoring the perceptions of parents." That central question of standards galvanizes parents, McCarthy says, giving schools a unique opportunity to invite them into an intellectual discourse that welcomes dissenting views as a sign of real interest.

"They have a rightful concern that their kids not suffer in comparison with others," McCarthy says. "Nobody wants their kids to be guinea pigs." A key solution, he argues, is to enlist college and university personnel in the change

Some Suggestions for Bringing School into the Community

- Apprenticeships, internships, and "service learning" programs involve community members by their very nature. Get key people together and brainstorm for ideas and opportunities.
- Use your city as a classroom. Build academic partnerships or sponsor student projects along with universities, agencies, and nonprofit groups.
- Sponsor open community forums where prominent educators, business leaders, and management experts talk about what they need schools to be teaching and why. Send written invitations to non-parent groups like the chamber of commerce, the Rotary Club, senior citizens' groups, preschools, etc. Televise meetings on local cable, so those who can't attend can watch. Leave plenty of time for questions.
- Publish a newsletter as often as possible—weekly is best—addressing real educational questions as well as upcoming events. It can be a forum for student ideas and parent input, too. Send it to anyone with any expressed interest in the schools, parent or not.
- Meet regularly with town or city officials to explore ways school and municipality can work together to better meet the needs of students. Be ready to help with facilities and share maintenance for public projects like recreation and the arts. Or look for ways to offer joint outreach services to young children, seniors, and students.
- Once students have substantial experience with Essential School challenges (like exhibitions and heterogeneous classes), get them to speak at community forums about the changes. But don't do this too early—substance convinces, not mere theory.
- Ask the local newspaper to publish a regular column about educational issues. Get someone who writes well to introduce Essential School ideas there, one by one. Use plenty of examples.

effort, making them familiar with Essential School principles and asking them to take special interest in students whose records may reflect changes ranging from integrated curriculum to exhibitions. CES has already formally begun this process; under the leadership of Sharon Lloyd Clark, its Admissions Project (modeled after a similar effort in the 1930s, the Progressive Education Association's Eight Year Study) has won support from several dozen selective colleges, starting with Amherst, Brown, and Columbia and progressing through a highly competitive lexicon. The National Association of College Admission Counselors has endorsed the Coalition's efforts and urged its members to familiarize colleges with changes in their schools. And regional Coalition conferences now make it a point to include admissions staff from public and private colleges in the area.

Communities Set Standards

At least as important as marshalling that support, however, is the action schools take to get communities to articulate their own standards for excellence. This issue has leaped to the forefront of the national agenda for school improvement, as state after state mandates new "performance outcome" standards and assessment methods by which to measure them. Up for grabs is whether such standards are to be general guidelines, with schools and districts having authority to meet and assess them by whatever methods they see fit, or whether some national curriculum and central testing instrument will come into standardized use. Arguing strongly for local control is CES chairman Theodore Sizer—and in his view, each community must play a unique and individual role in deciding what its high school graduates should know and be able to do.

Just that impulse moved New York's Croton-Harmon school district this spring, when the school board and Superintendent Sherry King decided to turn to sophisticated marketing techniques to explore the question of graduation standards in community focus groups. Their timing could not have been more apt. New York's Commissioner of Education, Tom Sobol, had just proposed to make schools accountable for meeting state curriculum guidelines in their own ways, giving each locality substantial latitude while monitoring them via a British-style system of auditing and inspection.

In her previous job as principal of Croton-Harmon's high school, King had already worked to draw parents into the Essential School effort there—notably, by regularly holding evening workshops where parents explored the same ideas teachers were studying in professional development. Her charge as superintendent was to expand this outreach to the larger community; but just how to do this, she admits, was not immediately clear.

"I started by meeting with the school board for an all-day work session on what its role would be in a restructured system," she says. As schools move to shared decision-making and management, King observes, school boards face the same uncomfortable confusions other stakeholders do: "They don't want to presume, but they don't want to be left out, either." Next the board called a major community meeting, specifically inviting a wide range of citizens groups and other business and civic leaders as well as parents "to talk about new goals for our schools," King says, and to hear speakers from the state and the Coalition. At that meeting, the board announced its plan for focus groups to continue the conversation about local goals and standards. Its chief questions for the community: "What do you want our high school graduates to know and be able to do? And what will you accept as evidence of their achievement?"

"We found someone in town who was trained in conducting focus groups," King says. "We had a series of prompts to follow up the questions with. I went to each session, but only as a note-taker; in the last ten minutes, they could ask me questions if they liked. And it was extraordinary—so many of the community concerns dovetailed precisely with the ideas we were already exploring." (For the exact questions asked, see sidebar, page 7.)

The community loved the focus groups, King says: "They keep asking for more!" And as the results are analyzed, they spark an important sequence of checks and balances in which the community plays a very explicit role. "In the future," King ventures, "our board will be in a position to serve as panel of judges for performance tasks developed at the school. They can support our parent-faculty decision-making council by keeping a check on students' progress. They will have a basis for agreeing how to judge work thoughtfully. And they can demonstrate our belief that we are *all* accountable for these agreed-upon assessments. We have got to be able to go back to our community and say, 'We have seen these assessments and they *do* demonstrate what we say we want for kids.'"

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Issues that Raise Hackles

The Croton-Harmon community was no model of harmonious views when this whole process began, says school board president Mary Jo Dean, who served on the seven-member committee both before and after Essential School ideas took hold. "People didn't feel that everything was fine," she says. "They read the *New York Times* and they were cognizant of the declining state of education in this country. They wanted higher standards set for our kids."

Parents in this largely upper-middle-class community were also driven, the board realized, by the desire to see their children accepted by competitive colleges. "We are trying to educate parents about how the SATs and other standardized tests have crippled the curriculum and pushed the level of learning to its lowest," Dean says. "I'm a science education consultant, and I've seen what it's done to the science curriculum." Her school board devotes every other meeting exclusively to educational issues; at those meetings members have shown parents typical questions on standardized tests, and described how they would like to replace those questions. "The typical multiple-choice question might ask, 'What is the basic particle of matter?' and you choose from the atom, the molecule, the element, and the ion," says Dean. "Do you want your kids to answer that? Or do you want them to be able to explain the particulate nature of matter?"

To help do that, Croton-Harmon musters all available resources—bringing in Coalition consultants, plying key opinion-makers with literature on educational issues, taking parents and board members along to conferences. "What causes problems is fear and lack of control," Dean argues. "You have to start with the broadest arena: What do we want for all children? We got teachers and students at the high school saying what they want to know and do when they get out; then we got parents to come and do the same thing. When you see unanimity on those flip charts, that's where you start—and where there are potential conflicts you bring everyone back in to work sessions, take a look at what we can observe and what experts say, and ask where do we go from here?"

Build Structures Early

A good relationship with the community takes time to build up, but it proves its worth when a school hits the inevitable rough spots over volatile change issues. "Croton-Harmon had a history of parental involvement," observes Bob McCarthy. "If you don't have a built-up set of structures in place, it's difficult to deal with trouble when it arises."

New schools face this problem in spades, and so their efforts make particularly good examples of the risks and benefits community involvement entails. In Amherst, New Hampshire, principal Bob Mackin and his hand-picked staff spent a full year planning before they opened the doors of Souhegan High School. At several community meetings and through four district-wide mailings, they introduced and explored Essential School ideas. But certain cherished principles which they held to be unshakeable—mixed achievement-level grouping, for example, and Souhegan's integrated curriculum—came under almost

Attitudes that Foster Involvement

- Start talking with middle school parents about shaping high school goals, so everybody has time to think through and become comfortable with Essential School ideas. The class entering 6th grade in 1993-94 will graduate from high school in 2000—a realistic target year.
- Use plain language, not fuzzy or misleading slogans, to describe the changes you have in mind. Your opponents can gain more ground with "no new taxes" than you can with "authentic assessment." Instead talk in concrete terms—about coaching all students to communicate, to work with others, to fulfill their potential, to demonstrate what they know.
- Use teacher conferences as conversations with parents, not one-way reports. First finding out what's on their minds establishes an emotional connection, which makes the intellectual connection come more easily.
- Don't feel you need a united front among teachers before broaching ideas for change to the community. You may make more headway if you are open about your vulnerabilities and about the difficulties of change.
- Make plans for involving the community even in the earliest planning stages. New schools do this as a matter of course, and so should established schools considering change.
- Don't denigrate or dismiss parents' legitimate concerns about the relationship between high school work and college admissions. Schools made that connection in the first place, after all.
- Listen to students' voices—they are your emissaries in the home and community. Ask students for feedback into the process of change.
- Start any shared governance move by training all involved together in setting agendas, consensus building, and decisionmaking. Don't forget to supply continued training as new people come in.
- Keep in touch with graduates and follow up on their post-secondary studies. Visit their colleges, meet their advisers, look at their work, observe the level of their involvement with their education. Keep records—this is good documentation.

immediate fire from parents who had been unhappy with similar ideas as they had played out at the local middle school. "In hindsight, we should have done even more early on," Mackin says now.

By the time school opened last fall, Souhegan's philosophy faced a full-scale political challenge, eventually including a school board contest and a citizens petition that specifically asked the town to replace the new ideas with a more traditional approach. Debate raged in the local newspaper and at candidates coffees. A month before the spring Town Meeting where school affairs come up for district-wide vote, Souhegan sponsored two forums where educational and business experts testified in favor of the Essential School and teachers and students described their experiences. On the Town Meeting floor the school's opponents traded arguments and evidence with Superintendent Rick Lalley (New Hampshire's Superintendent of the Year); of the six students who rose to offer opinions, only one criticized his courses as being less than challenging. The vote—cast by written ballot because of its incendiary potential—came in for Souhegan, 284 to 48.

"I tell people they can depend on democracy, even though in the short term it may look like you're getting beat up," says Marjorie Ledell, who helped write ECS's new book *How to Deal with Criticism to School Change* (available through ASCD, 1250 N. Pitt St., Alexandria, VA 22314-1403). "It'll carry you through." Still, the crux of winning these political struggles is not mere public relations, Bob Mackin observes, but real substance. "Challenging our brightest students is our toughest and most talked-about issue here," he says. "We're not sweeping it under the rug." Good public relations only buys time, he says, "to confront the more difficult and different experiences. Meanwhile, we invite parents in frequently to witness exhibitions and student work. And we continually work with teachers on new skills and strategies, so all students will be challenged to their maximum ability."

From inside the school building, where teachers struggle to accommodate new and difficult educational ways, the temptation is great to delay potentially disruptive community involvement until the faculty is unified in its beliefs. But experience shows that the earlier schools turn outsiders into insiders, the better. In the comfortable Portland suburb of Cape Elizabeth, Maine, for example, the high school staff had been exploring Essential School ideas for three years in a bid to raise standards for all students. In the flush of developing new proposals for longer-block schedules and other changes, they paid too little attention to parents already frustrated by other district reforms they saw as going poorly. Even with a 35-7 positive faculty vote and substantial school board support, when push came to shove the board voted to table Coalition membership until community consensus could be reached.

"When you're up to your neck in alligators," high school principal Frank Miles comments wryly, "it's hard to think about anything but alligators." In retrospect, he says, his faculty realizes they should have involved middle school parents in discussions about high school change. "By the time we were ready to act, their kids would be coming into high school and the parents would be on our wave length."

"You need to try initially to get a good solid conversation going among the teachers," says Marjorie Ledell. "If they are feuding among themselves, a bad perception develops in the community. But you can't slow down the rest of process. Things leak out anyway, and you might as well acknowledge what you're going through. Even if you don't have consensus, if people feel like you're open you've made a lot of headway."

Finally, Frank Miles warns, "Don't get too far out in front of your community. If you want to move to a longer schedule in the high school, start talking with parents about that. If you want to focus on curriculum essentials, go after that kind of question. If teachers are going to focus on habits of mind instead of mere content coverage, parents have got to be willing to accept the achievement test results." Schools should use whatever means they can devise—a steering committee, potluck suppers, action groups—to build a constituency, Miles urges. Even if only a small percentage of the community shows up, a supportive network of information begins that will spread as people talk informally at athletic events and elsewhere.

"That kind of web makes change not a foreign notion," Miles says. "We need to convey that the Coalition is not a franchise—it means evolving our own program consistent with Essential School principles. It took such an effort to get ourselves ready to change the world inside the school that we didn't focus on managing change in the rest of our community."

What Is a Community?

Magnet schools or other schools drawing from a widely dispersed community must often work especially hard to draw parents in. New York City's Central Park East Secondary School mails a weekly newsletter to every parent and anyone else who has an interest in the school; it not only reminds them of key dates and announcements but describes Essential School ideas in a regular column by co-principals Deborah Meier and Paul Schwartz, publishes student opinion and commentary, and urges parents to vote for supportive candidates in school board elections. "It's interesting that a lot of the most effective schools in terms of involving the community are the ones led by people with grass-roots community organizing experience," observes ethnographer Donna Muncey, who with Patrick McQuillan is completing a book based on a five-year study of eight Essential schools.

Students and their parents have chosen Central Park East through the city's school choice system, and a condition of enrollment is that parents and students together attend regular teacher conferences. An intimate advisory system keeps close track of student progress and attendance, always watchful for unusual home situations that might affect them. And though the school has no strictly geographical community, it creates a sense of community with a range of outside entities: local colleges where some students take classes; Columbia University's NCREST project on assessment; community service organizations where students volunteer; and other nearby Coalition member schools.

Expanding conventional notions of a school's community also entails drawing in those who traditionally have been ignored or excluded by the mainstream. The Coalition's ATLAS Communities partnership with Yale University's School Development Program, Harvard University's Project Zero, and the Education Development Corporation draws inspiration from Yale professor James Comer's work with elementary school communities to bring poor and minority parents into the educational mainstream. Comer has sought to bridge the social and cultural gulf between home and school, which he believes deeply affects students' psycho-social development and in turn their academic achievement.

A student may encounter trouble at school, Comer argues, if he has no experience with negotiating and compromise; yet at home he may be punished if he doesn't fight back. Parents then take their children's failure as evidence of the mainstream's animosity; defensive or hostile, they avoid contact with school staff, and the distrust becomes mutual. Comer's School Development Program enlists these parents onto school governance and management teams, where they work with school people and mental health professionals to shape academic policies, social programs, and school procedures. Parent aides work for minimum wage in the classroom, to help staff integrate social skills with academics and the arts, teaching children everything from how to write checks to how to plan concerts. Comer urges communities and schools to regard students' social development and academic ability as equally important; the school's role, he argues, is not only to produce high test scores but to prepare students to assume adult responsibilities.

Small Schools, No Surprises

The more schools work to know their communities in non-adversarial ways, it seems, the more trusting people will be. But few enough parents serve on shared management teams that schools need plenty of other strategies to get the community on board. "It's hard to create relationships with the parents of 2,000 kids," comments CES's Rick Lear, who works on the ATLAS project. "Back-to-school nights don't do it." The best

Community Focus Groups Ask: "What Do We Expect from Graduates?"

Focus groups of citizens in the Croton-Harmon, New York School District met with trained market-research professionals to answer these questions, each of which was explored further using the prompts that follow:

1. **What would you expect a graduate of our public schools to know and be able to do?**
2. **What evidence would you accept that he or she has achieved those goals?**

Prompts for Exploring #1 (Graduation Expectations)

1. **The overall education requirements in terms of years of English, history, mathematics, science, etc. have not changed in any significant way since most of us went to school. Our students will enter a work place that demands technology and where most of them will have approximately seven jobs in their lifetime. Do you think that the current requirements adequately help prepare students for that work place?**
2. **For the past five years the Labor Department and business roundtables around the country have listed interpersonal skills and the ability to work in a group as essential to success in the work place. Do you think that the schools should work on these areas of the curriculum?**
3. **In times of economic difficulty society tends to focus on basics. What is your feeling about the place of music and the arts in preparing our students to take their place in society?**
4. **Are there any particular skills (for example, the ability to write clearly), habits of mind (for example, perseverance over time), or content (for example, facts about the Civil War) that you believe all graduates of our school should know or be able to demonstrate?**

Prompts for Exploring #2 (Acceptable Evidence)

1. **Doctoral students have to not only present their research but defend it orally before a committee. Do you think that high school students should have to publicly present and defend their larger works, and would you accept such a defense as a demonstration of mastery?**
2. **If students engage in school-sponsored internships or projects with child-care agencies, industry, or environmental organizations, would you accept the report of the student's supervisor as part of his or her academic record?**
3. **Many of us have the experience of barely passing a certain course in order to get a required credit for graduation. Some schools now give a grade of A, B, C, or Incomplete, requiring the students to take the time necessary to do better than just pass. What do you think of this idea for our schools?**

results, he says, have come from advisory systems or very small "houses," where parental contact is facilitated by the fact that a student may work with the same teachers for several years.

Some schools, like Thayer High School in Winchester, New Hampshire, also bring parents monthly into the classroom to actually try the work their children are doing. Others have sponsored "family math nights," where parents and students together work on problems using new approaches. "It's labor intensive," concedes Lear. "But parents start to understand some of the complexity of what the school is trying to get their kids to learn. There may be no other way."

"Administrators should spend as little time as possible *explaining* Essential School ideas," agrees Bob McCarthy, "and as much time as possible having parents *experience* what it's like to be in an Essential school classroom." For another key to community involvement, Bob McCarthy suggests, Essential schools should look to where parents have historically gathered in support—to drama, band, sports, and other school performances. "People like to see their kids perform," he observes. "Now we have to make academic exhibitions into performances worth coming to look at."

That ties in directly, McCarthy says, to the volatile issues of academic challenge that so often turn parents into opponents of Essential School reforms. "They can come see first-class, serious student work being honored," he says. "But the school's clear policy should be to honor that work *after* it is demonstrated, not *before*, which is what dividing kids into honors classes does. It's no different from a college designating someone *cum laude*."

Students who do meaningful work as apprentices with mentors in the community also win allies for Essential School ideas. And bringing in non-parents with special skills as juries for student exhibitions spreads community awareness and raises academic standards to reflect the real world's demands.

At the same time, experienced principals have learned, they can build key supporters in the community by regularly inviting perhaps half a dozen opinion-makers—clergy, or service organization leaders, or business people—to informally discuss their views about what students should learn, and how. (The media likes that opportunity too, usually through individual interviews.) "Quite often these people have never been asked about their perceptions," says Marjorie Ledell.

"The point is not that everybody is going to agree with you," Rick Lear says. "It's that you have an established relationship with enough people so that when you talk about new ideas they don't come as a surprise." Introducing change to people just as the decision has been made or is about to be made, he argues, overwhelms them with confusion and misinformation. "In lots of change efforts people have to accept or support things they aren't sure about," he says. "But they don't like surprise."

"So much of the whole situation was about trust," says Toni Eubank of Salem High School, where last year's parental uprising has quieted into a steady dialogue about standards and teaching practices. "We have just as many difficult issues facing us now as we ever did—from our opposition to AP courses on down. The difference now is that we're talking about them together with the community. That one thing has got them on our side." ❑

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