

# When Parents are Engaged, the Schools Get Better!

By Maria S. Quezada, Ph. D, CAFE CEO

*“No single reform solution really works on its own. Instead, schools, districts, communities, and families must take multiple actions to address the complex problem of turning around chronically low-performing schools.” (Weiss, Lopez & Stark 2011)*

Over the last seven years, CAFE developed and implemented a parent leadership development program that is offered throughout California. Each year, on average, more than 12,000 parents participated in parent sessions designed to provide them information on how to effectively engage with schools for the benefit of their children’s education. CAFE’s Project INSPIRE has four overall goals: 1) Reducing the achievement gap for at risk students; 2) Developing parent knowledge, leadership skills, and educational engagement to raise achievement levels of their children; 3) Increasing the capacity of schools and districts to maintain high quality parent engagement and leadership programs focused on student achievement; and 4) Developing parent leadership skills including the role as trainers of other parents at the school. Besides the direct services to parents listed above, the program also has provided over 150,000 pieces of informational brochures and handouts yearly and reached over 3,000,000 parents and others through radio and television programs where staff shared their expertise to program audiences locally, nationally and internationally.

## **A Research-based Family, School, and Community Engagement Model**

### **Project INSPIRE’s Parent Leadership Development Program Outcomes include:**

1. Knowledgeable parents with the leadership skills to take action steps to ensure their children have equitable educational opportunities.
2. Schools and districts serving diverse background students and maintaining high quality parent engagement and leadership programs.
3. Development of parent leaders who can effectively participate in local school reform efforts.
4. Action Team for Partnerships Model (Epstein, 2008) at schools that focus on increased student achievement where schools establish a structure for meaningful parental engagement.
5. Increased student achievement for diverse background students

Project INSPIRE is now in the last year of grant funding provided by the U.S. Department of Education’s Office of Innovation and Improvement as a Parent Information Resource Center (PIRC). From 2006-2011, as part of the services provided to schools and parents, Project INSPIRE also is conducting a research study on the impact of parental engagement on student achievement at sixteen school-based centers. This is a longitudinal study of randomly selected Treatment (leadership program provided) and Matched Control (no leadership program) pairs of schools from among the pool of Program Improvement schools in partnering school districts. By tracking parental engagement via each parent’s participation in Project

INSPIRE’s leadership program, as well as the type, frequency, and intensity of parental engagement over time, and monitoring their child’s academic achievement in English Language Arts and Mathematics, this study will assess whether parental engagement will significantly improve 1) their child’s learning; and, 2) overall school achievement. Preliminary findings are consistent with those from other research efforts examining the relationship between parental engagement and student success at school (C. Nye, J. Schwartz, and H. Turner, 2006; Henderson and Mapp, 2008). Project INSPIRE’s findings for both Year 3 and Year 4 are consistent: Treatment Students (those whose parents completed and implemented what they

learned from Project INSPIRE's leadership development program) realized a statistically significant improvement in the rate and level of academic growth than their peers (Control Students) whose parents had not participated in the leadership program. Moreover, the average rate and level of academic growth of Treatment Students is also greater than the average peer statewide, suggesting a closing of the achievement gap. Please note, these results are tentative, pending completion of Year 5 (AY10-11) of the study. Nonetheless, these preliminary findings are consistent with other research that suggests that when parents from chronically under-performing schools are engaged, their children can significantly improve their learning. Still to be addressed is to understand the number of parents that need to be engaged, the type of engagement to improve school-wide achievement. Project INSPIRE is documenting a positive and convincing relationship between parent engagement and significant increased academic achievement of their children. Finally, as the majority of the families in Treatment Schools are of color (89%), low-income (68%), and English Language Learners (64%), these

findings validate Mapp (2009) that the relationship between parent engagement and student achievement holds across families of all economic, racial/ethnic, and educational backgrounds and for students at all ages.

The CAFE Project INSPIRE Family, School, Community Engagement program has three components that are available to all schools and districts.

### **Project INSPIRE is documenting a positive and convincing relationship between parent engagement and significant increased academic achievement of their children.**

- **Level 1 - Awareness** of critical information impacting their children (comprised of 12 one and one-half hour modules). These workshop sessions are offered at conferences, district level or at school sites. Parents can attend one or more sessions.
- **Level 2 – Mastery** an in-depth understanding of critical information impacting their children (comprised of 12 three hour modules) Participant-centered and significantly more intensive in terms of content (deeper coverage), time, and effort. Parents are required to complete all 12 training modules, for a total of 36 hours of face-to-face project based learning activities. This is a school-based program
- **Level 3 – Expert**-Development and refinement of leadership knowledge and skills to create and sustain family-school community engagement in supporting student achievement (comprised of 16 three hour modules). A Trainer of Trainers parent leadership development effort that builds upon the knowledge and skills developed in Level 2 training and parents/community liaisons completing the program can offer services to other parents in their schools.





Each of these levels provides relevant and meaningful information to parents so they can participate fully in their children's education. To date the most meaningful change has come from those schools that have participated in the Project INSPIRE research study (Level 2 and 3) for the past four years. At these schools research findings have indicated that children whose parents have developed a strong sense of who they are as parents; that know and understand their role in their child's schooling; and have formed a strong sense of community at their school alongside educators, indeed have seen their children succeeding academically. Project INSPIRE school sites are experiencing increased student achievement and meeting their API and AYP targets. They have a strong focus on implementing the parental engagement component of the essential elements of school reform—creating Family, School, and Community Partnerships.

By engaging in Project INSPIRE parents are learning that, regardless of their own education and experiences, they have a critical role in supporting and guiding their child's education, by drawing upon their life experiences and learning how to engage in a range of activities at home,

**At these schools research findings have indicated that children whose parents have developed a strong sense of who they are as parents; that know and understand their role in their child's schooling; and have formed a strong sense of community at their school alongside educators, indeed have seen their children succeeding academically.**

school, and in their community (Epstein, 2009). Parents are learning the far reaching impact of school engagement upon their child in terms of improved student behavior, attendance, increased interest in what they are learning at school, as well as at home. This occurs when parents simply visit the school, help out at the school regularly, speaking with teachers, principal, and other parents, and/or simply sitting down when the child comes home to discuss what the child learned or did that day in class. All of these activities are powerful statements and actions to the child about the value and importance of an education, not the least of which is the engaged parent as an educational role model for their child.

All of these above actions are in line with what can happen when we begin to change the focus of parental engagement efforts. There is a new understanding that parental engagement is an integral part of schooling and that parents, teachers, school site administrators as well as central district are responsible for maintaining and enriching parental engagement opportunities. School personnel need to see families as collaborative agents of change in service of improved outcomes for students, schools and communities. Weiss, Lopez and Rosenberg (2010) in

## Parental Engagement

Old Paradigm		New Paradigm
Individual Responsibility	➔	Shared Responsibility
Deficit-based/Adversarial	➔	Strength-based and collaborative
Random acts	➔	Systemic
Add-on	➔	Integrated
Events Driven	➔	Learning Outcomes Driven
Compliance	➔	Ownership & Continuous Improvement
One-Time Project	➔	Sustained

Source: Karen Mapp (November 2010) – U.S. Department of Education’s National Policy Forum for Family, School, and Community Engagement).

*Beyond Random Acts Family, School, and Community Engagement as an Integral Part of Education Reform* state, “it is time to transform family engagement strategies so that they are intentionally aligned with student learning and achievement.” Leading experts in parental engagement (Mapp 2010, Weiss, et al 2010) believe that in order to maximize the potential for increasing student academic achievement we must change from an old paradigm of parent education to a new form of parental engagement where collaboration, integration, shared responsibility and a focus on student achievement are the key factors.

### The Community Learning Theory-Unity Principle

Families of low come income and culturally diverse backgrounds value education and want their children to succeed. Project INSPIRE has documented that parental advocacy at school also has a positive effect on children’s academic performance. When programs and activities for families are linked to what their children are learning and doing in class, there is demonstrable improvement in student achievement. It is important to note that this parental engagement has a positive impact from Kindergarten through College. Traditionally, however, schools and educators have not employed the power parental engagement can bring to the school setting. Through Project INSPIRE’s work with parents we have identified four factors that are critical for improving or blocking parental engagement (Ramirez, 2010):

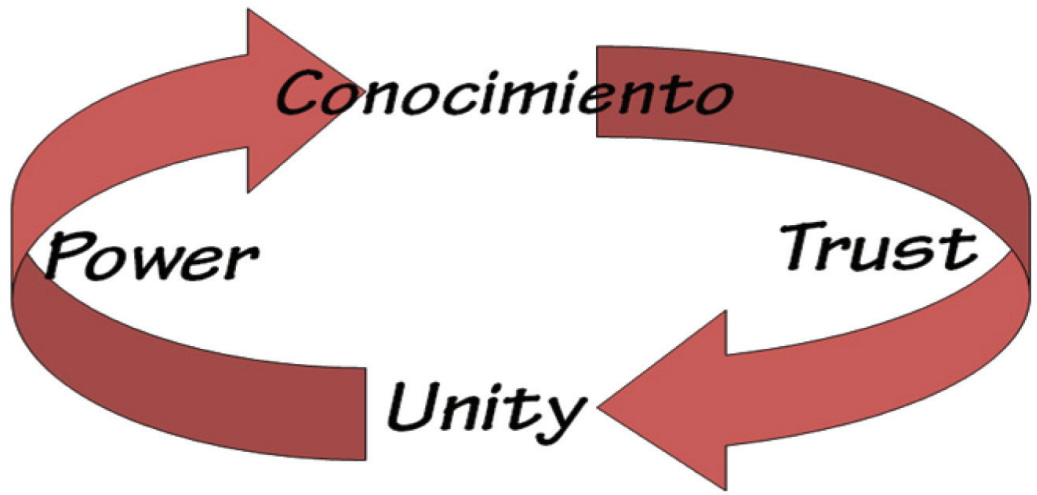
- **Types of Parent Involvement** (what types of engagement and the extent to which parents are introduced to each type of engagement at home, school, and within the community; and provided with opportunities to “practice” each type of engagement);
- **Frequency of Involvement** (i.e., how often parents are provided opportunities to learn, practice, and reflect on each type, as well as, once learned, the opportunities they are provided to implement each type of involvement);
- **Intensity of Involvement** (amount of time parents spend learning, practicing, and reflecting on each Type of involvement, and, once learned, the duration and strength of opportunities they have to implement each type); and
- **Teaching and Learning Strategies** used to help each parent learn, practice, and reflect on how they can support their child’s learning at home, school, and in the community as well as how to work with others to engage in on-going team activities

During the four years of implementation Project INSPIRE has shown that it is an exceptional approach to building the capacity of schools to meaningfully engage parents. The approach used in the parent leadership development program acknowledges that parents in different communities have different needs that must be addressed. Further evidence of the exceptional nature of

Project INSPIRE's Parent Leadership Development program has empowered parents at several levels during the last four years of the program. Surveys and focus groups (Principal, Teachers and Parents) conducted at the research sites have documented the following:

- a) **Individual Parent level.** Parents consistently expressed amazement that not only could they learn about the important things they needed to know about their children's education, but that they could teach and work collaboratively with others to improve learning for all children at their school. In the last four years of the project 411 parents successfully completed their 48 hour intensive Level 3 leadership development program. Parent leaders (225) began training other parents and to date they have provided 111 parent leadership sessions to 1,629 parents;
- b) **Parent-to-parent level.** Friendships have been formed and grown with other parents at their child's school. Parents are more actively involved in and taken more leadership roles at their school site. An example, a CA PIRC-1 Project INSPIRE parent assumed responsibility to develop school-wide activities for parents. One example is an elementary school in an urban community. The parent group took the initiative to organize two school-wide cultural events: Latino Heritage Day and Mother's Day. Students prepared and presented heritage culture, poetry, song, dance, and theater. With parent advocacy and support in preparing students, teachers collaborated to create the parent-initiated events. This event drew approximately 200 family members. Parents in Paramount, California also planned and engaged 300 parents in their annual "Despierta Mujer" conference where personal and educational topics were discussed.
- c) **School level.** At one of the eighteen schools, the Principal shared the need to collect money for copy paper. Parent addressed the issue by taking the lead and with the support of other parents they made all parents aware of their schools immediate need and asked for their support. Parents sold tickets to raffle items. This was a win-win for teachers who now had the supplies they needed for instruction. The parents effectively modeled an integrated and coordinated effort for all children at their child's school. The tickets sold raised money for school supplies. From these successful efforts parents began to participate in school site committees and assist their schools in formulating their school level plan for student achievement and parental engagement.
- d) **District Level.** A Project INSPIRE partnership with a local urban community is moving towards developing district-wide parent engagement by working alongside the District's Community Liaisons to integrate Project INSPIRE in their community work in every school. This will not only distribute this work to every school in the district, but it will immediately reach and prepare local leaders within the African American, Chinese-speaking, Spanish-Speaking, and English-speaking communities. Through this effort two Project INSPIRE certified presenters, a middle school and a high school community liaison collaborated to bring parents of eighth graders and their students to a Project INSPIRE presentation at the high school their children will be attending. The Level 3 Certified Presenters jointly delivered Module 2—the importance of effective home-school communication.
- e) **Regional level.** Project INSPIRE is strategically imbedding its parent leadership program in established organizations by training permanent staff responsible for parent services. Examples include the Archdiocese of San Bernardino wherein staff is training their parent outreach and community liaisons throughout the Archdiocese, impacting all 94 Catholic parishes, some of which are in the poorest bottom third of California's communities. The San Bernardino Diocesan office has signed a letter of Partnership with San Bernardino County Superintendent of Schools to provide Project INSPIRE workshops throughout the Diocese. Project INSPIRE is currently piloting in three churches to provide sessions on how to support their child's academic success. Some of those churches are in the community of some of the lowest performing schools in the San Bernardino City Unified School District.
- f) **State level.** Project INSPIRE is a member of a state-wide initiative to increase parental involvement in their children's schooling to increase their academic achievement. Traditionally under-served families and their children are a priority, along with chronically under-performing schools (PI). Knowledgeable parent leaders are available for statewide leadership. In November 2010 school site teams from the research site came together to receive Action Team for Partnership Model training with Joyce Epstein. They are the pilot sites for a statewide effort to bring the Action Team for Partnership Model structure to other districts and schools in California.
- g) **National and Binational Levels.** Project INSPIRE is partnering with the Office of the Mexican Consulate as a member of their Binational Advisory Committee to support efforts to increase family and student involvement in educational programs. Project staff works with the Archdiocese of San Bernardino and the Mexican Consulate in San Bernardino and Los Angeles to provide parents with access to the parent leadership development programs as part of a wider effort to reduce dropout rates. Forty-six Parents in 6 of the research sites also take advantage of the opportunity to complete their formal education through the Plaza Comunitaria program developed by Mexico. We have at least eight parents completing their primary education; six parents completed their middle school education; and one became a high school graduate.

## Creating Engagement - The Community Learning Theory Unity Principle



the Project INSPIRE approach is found in the research foundation upon which the project is built. Much of the project is grounded in Community Learning Theory, originally theorized by Roberto Vargas and Francisco Hernandez, which validates and builds on the life experiences of participants. It recognizes parents as the primary teachers of their children and adapts the perspective that the process of empowerment begins with the recognition that each of us possesses knowledge in certain areas, and that by sharing this wealth of knowledge we can achieve our goals—thus creating a sense of community at the school where there is a now a shared responsibility for increasing student achievement.

Acknowledging and building on parents' existing cultural "funds of knowledge" not only increases the likelihood of success in giving parents vital school information, but also is a critical link to improving student achievement. Additionally, incorporating Joyce Epstein's six types of parent involvement (parenting, communicating, volunteering, learning at home, decision making and collaborating with community) and the Action Team for Partnership Model provides Project INSPIRE with the framework for developing Family-school-community collaborations that are essential to reach the increased student achievement goal of the project as well as change the academic success of students at program improvement schools throughout California.

### References

- California Association for Bilingual Education, (2005), *Community Learning Theory Overview*.
- Epstein, Joyce et al. (2002) *School Family and Community Partnerships: Your Handbook for Action*, 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition. Thousand Oaks, California: Corwin Press
- Epstein, J. (1987). Parent involvement: What the research says to administrators. *Education and Urban Society*, 19, 19-36.
- Etzioni, A. (1993). *The spirit of community*. New York, New York: Crown.
- Ferguson, C., Jordan, C., & Baldwin, M. (2010). *Working Systemically in Action: Engaging Family & Community*. Austin, TX: SEDL.
- Henderson, Anne T. and Mapp, Karen (2002) *A New Wave of Evidence: Southwest Educational Development Laboratory (SEDL): Austin TX*
- Jeynes, William. (2005) *A Meta-Analysis of the Effects of Parental Involvement on Minority Children's Academic Achievement*, Education and Urban Society, (77 studies)
- Joyce L. Epstein Ph.D., et al., (1966). Partnership Center for the Social Organization of Schools, Johns Hopkins University, Baltimore, Maryland.
- Kellaghan, T. et al. (1993). *The home environment and school learning: promoting parental involvement in the education of children*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Mapp, Karen. (2010). Presentation at the U.S. Department of Education's *National Policy Forum for Family, School, and Community Engagement*. Alexandria, Virginia. September.
- North Central Regional Educational Laboratory. (1994) *Funds of Knowledge: A Look at Luis Moll's Research into Hidden Family Resources*. CITY SCHOOLS, 1 (1), 19-21.
- Nye, C., Schwartz, J. and Turner, H. (2006) *The Effectiveness of Parental Involvement for Improving the Academic Performance of Elementary School Children*, Campbell Collaborative Reviews of Intervention and Policy Evaluations.
- Redding, Sam *Parents and Learning*. Educational Practices Series developed by the International Academy of Education and distributed by the International Bureau of Education and the Academy. <http://www.ibe.unesco.org>
- Ramirez, J. David. (2010) *Building Family Support for Student Achievement: CAFE Project INSPIRE Parent Leadership Development Program in The Multilingual Educator*, a publication of the California Association for Bilingual Education.
- Senechal, Monique and Young, Laura (2008) *The Effect of Family Literacy Interventions on Children's Acquisition of Reading from Kindergarten to Grade 3: Meta-Analytic Review*, Review of Educational Research, (16 intervention studies)
- Sergiovani, T. J. (1994). *Building community in schools*. San Francisco, Jossey-Bass.
- Weiss, Heather B., Lopez, M. Elena and Rosenberg, Heidi (2010) *Beyond Random Acts Family, School, and Community Engagement as an Integral Part of Education Reform*. Harvard Family Research Project
- Weiss, H.B., Bouffard, S.M., Bridgill, B. L., & Gordon, E.W. (2009). *Reframing family involvement in education: Supporting families to support educational equity* (Equity Matters: Research Review No. 5).
- New York: The Campaign for Educational Equity, Teachers College.
- Weiss, Heather B, Lopez, M. Elena, Stark, Deborah R. (2011) *Breaking New Ground: Data Systems Transform Family Engagement in Education*. Issue Brief from the National PTA and the Harvard Family Research Project. Cambridge, Massachusetts.