



Family Partnerships

Uptown High School's Mardi Gras Carnival, organized by the 21-person Parent Advisory Council, is a fun family event that raises nearly \$1,000 each year.

Midtown Elementary teachers reach their goal of 100 percent participation in parent-teacher conferences, in which they strive to convey all the important information about programs, test scores, and grades in only 15 minutes.

Downtown Middle School draws more than half of its families to Technology Night. Parents walk through impressive exhibits of student projects and then enjoy refreshments in the

How can schools meaningfully engage families in supporting student learning?

JoBeth Allen

cafeteria, converted to a student-run Cyberspace Café.

Which of these endeavors to "involve parents" contribute to student learning?

To start a conversation about this question at your school, you might want to gather a group of educators, students, and family members to brain-

storm a list of everything the school does to involve families. If you're like most schools, it will be an impressive list. Next, put each item in one of three categories: Builds Deep Relationships; Supports Student Learning; or Does Neither (But We Keep Doing It Anyway). Finally, examine the activities in the first two columns and ask, Which families are benefiting? Which families are not?

Contrary to the prevailing myth, when parents or guardians walk into school, their children's learning does not automatically increase. Mattingly, Radmila, McKenzie, Rodriguez, and Kayzar (2002) analyzed 41 parent involvement programs. They concluded that some things we count as parental

involvement—being room parents, signing behavior reports, attending PTA meetings, and so on—don't improve student achievement. So what does?

Henderson and Mapp (2002) examined 80 studies on parental involvement, preschool through high school, throughout the United States. They concluded that family involvement was likely to increase student achievement when that involvement was connected to academic learning. Let's look at three important approaches they identified: building respectful relationships, engaging families in supporting learning at home, and addressing cultural differences.

Building Respectful Relationships *Family Funds of Knowledge*

Horses. That was the common thread Kathy Amanti noticed from home visits

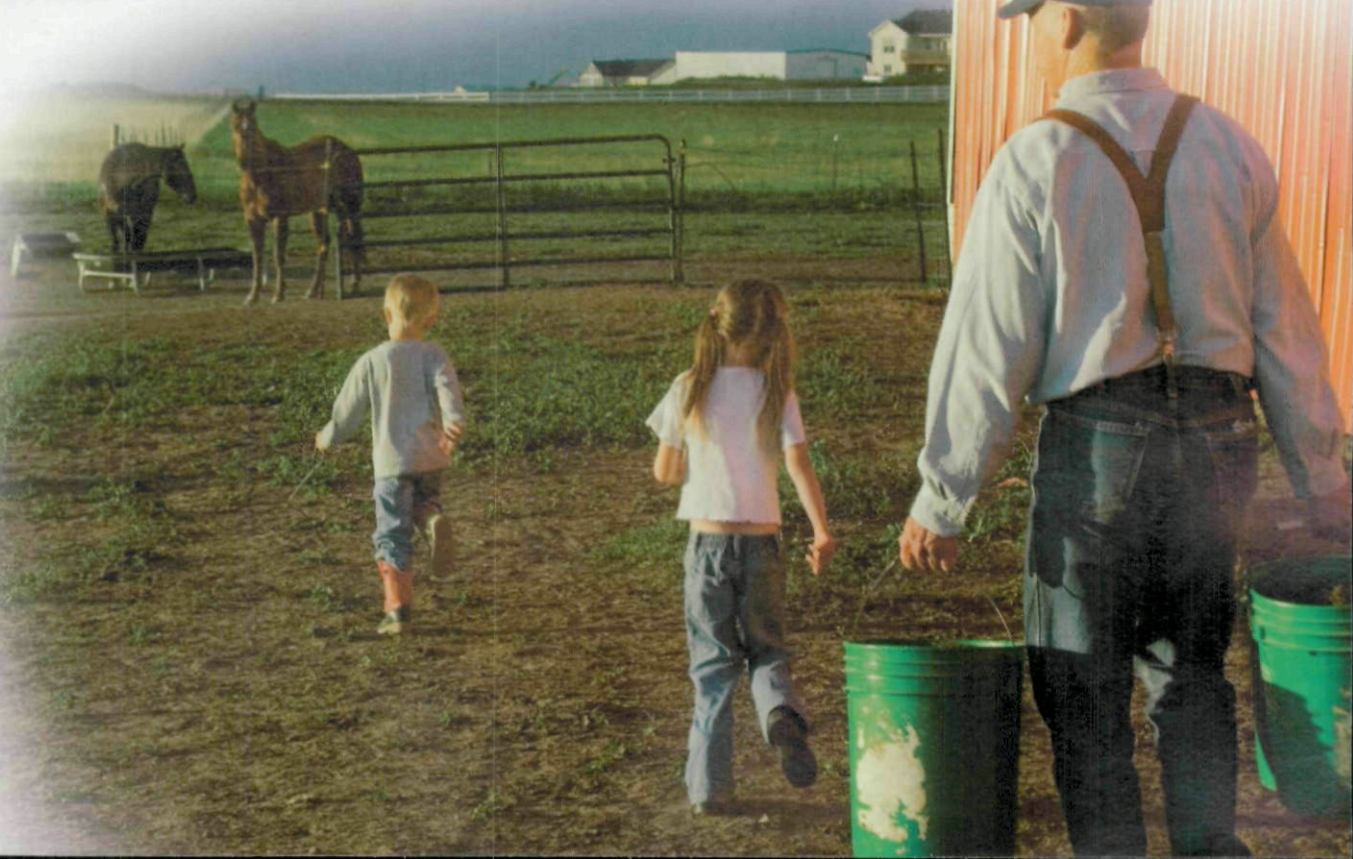
with three families in her multiage bilingual classroom. She learned that Carlos's father was teaching his sons how to care for and ride the family's three horses; that Fernando rode and cared for horses each summer when he stayed with his grandparents in Mexico; and that the Rivera family had gathered to watch a videotape of a relative riding in a horse race in Sonoyta, Mexico.

Surveying the rest of her class, Amanti found a great deal of interest in and knowledge about horses. Together, she and her students designed an interdisciplinary unit on horses, which included taking a field trip to Carlos's home, observing a parent shoeing a horse, and viewing the Riveras' video. Families were resources on individual projects as well, helping students study Spanish explorers; the history of saddles; local horse ordinances; horse

anatomy; measurement (converting hands to inches and feet); and horse gestation and evolution.

Amanti was one of a group of teachers and professors who worked with Mexican and Yaqui Indian families in Tucson, Arizona (González, Moll, & Amanti, 2005). These educators challenged the deficit model and developed a powerful alternative: learning about and incorporating family *funds of knowledge* into the classroom. Teachers studied the history of their border community. They visited homes and entered into conversations—not scripted interviews—centering on family and work history (border crossings, extended families, religious traditions, work experiences); household activities (gardening, home and car repair, caring for children, recreation); and parents' views of their roles (raising children,

that Count



languages spoken at home, schooling).

The home visits enabled teachers and families to build *confianza* (mutual trust) and to create *reciprocity* (a healthy partnership in which teachers and parents give in ways that support one another and support the student). The teachers learned that all families have important experiences, skills, and knowledge that teachers can tap into. The teachers also became more knowledgeable about how their students learned outside school. For example, in many Mexican and Yaqui families, children are active participants and ask questions that guide their own learning, skills not always encouraged at school.

Throughout the year, teachers met in study groups to discuss what they learned and to create thematic units that built on their community's funds of knowledge. They learned that families had a wealth of knowledge about ranching, farming, mining, and construction. In the area of business, they knew about appraising, renting and selling, labor laws, and building codes. Household management acumen included budgeting, child care, cooking, and repair. Many had knowledge of both contemporary and folk medicine for people and animals. Religious knowledge included rituals; texts (especially the Bible); and moral and ethical understandings.

We've seen how Kathy Amanti incorporated family funds of knowledge into meaningful learning that went beyond the classroom. Here's another example of the way learning with and from families can support student achievement.

Teacher-Parent Partnerships for Learning

Antonio was 13, had a broad vocabulary, and was fluent in oral Spanish and English. He had been homeless for five years, and his family frequently moved. He stopped reading specialist Paula

Murphy in the hall one day, asking, "I need help in reading. Can I go to your class?"

Paula started making home visits to Antonio's family at the shelter, at a friend's apartment, and at other temporary housing. She learned that his mother and stepfather helped him with homework; his mother wrote short stories, provided emotional support,

Educators and family members begin to understand cultural differences when they share their lives.

and encouraged him to do well in school. Paula designed a reading program that actively involved his parents. She engaged in regular communication with the family. She also intervened with the district so Antonio could stay in her school when the family moved. In one year, Antonio's reading and writing skills improved significantly. Paula reflected,

As a Puerto Rican . . . I felt that sharing the culture and the language of my Latino students was enough to understand their world. . . . I learned I know nothing about growing up poor, homeless, and in an environment of violence. . . . I learned of my responsibility to understand not only my students' ethnic culture, but their community culture as well. (Murphy, 1994, p. 87)

Although there is no substitute for the personal relationships and deep understanding of family knowledge developed in home visits, it's not always

possible for teachers to visit every student's home on a regular basis. But there's another way of learning about a student's life outside of school—hand her a camera!

Photographs of Local Knowledge Sources (PhOLKS)

I was part of a teacher study group in Georgia that used photography to learn about family funds of knowledge (Allen et al., 2002). The PhOLKS group served a culturally, linguistically, and economically diverse student population. Educators in our group were African American, Colombian, and European American; Christian and Jewish; originally from the Northeast, Midwest, and South; with childhoods from poor to privileged. This diversity was essential in mediating our understanding of cultural differences.

With a small grant, we paid for three 35mm cameras, film, and processing for each classroom. We invited students to photograph what was important to them in their homes and neighborhoods. Teachers prepared students by analyzing photographic essays, sharing photographs of their own lives outside school, and inviting parents who enjoyed photography to help students learn how to see through the camera's eye. English as a second language teacher Carmen Urdanivia-English read from her photo-illustrated memoir about growing up in Colombia and then invited a reporter from the local Spanish-language newspaper to show students ways to document family and community histories.

Students took cameras home on a rotating schedule, charged with capturing their out-of-school lives. Teachers invited students and family members to write or dictate stories about their photos. Parents and guardians contributed descriptions, memories, poetry, letters, and personal stories.

Cyndy, a white teacher, worried about Kenesha, a black student who often slept in class. Other teachers at the school said her mother was never involved and had been in special education when she attended the school. When Kenesha took her photo journal home with an invitation to write about the pictures, her mother wrote,

My daughter name is Kenesha. . . . She is very sweet all the teacher and people love her because she is understanding and nice, polite, sweet, listen, smart. She have her good days & bad days but she is the sweetest child you like to spend time with. . . . Members of the church love to hear her sing she sings so good you love her. She like to read and talk a lot. She loves dogs. She like to play with dolls. She love her new baby brother. (Allen et al., 2002, p. 317)

Cyndy and Kenesha's mother began communicating frequently through notes and phone calls. Mom wanted to know how Kenesha was doing. She promised to make sure Kenesha got more sleep.

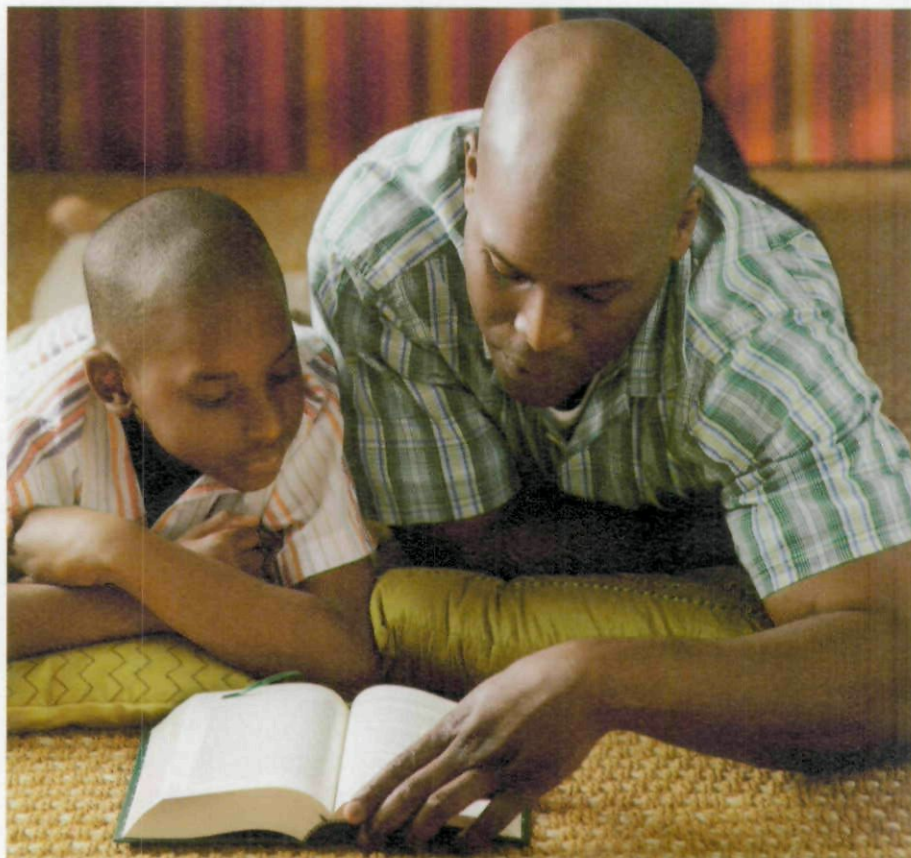
One photograph, one invitation, and one letter did not change Kenesha's life. The family still struggled, and so did Kenesha—but now there was a partnership working together to teach her.

Engaging Families in Supporting Learning at Home

The parental support that made a difference for Antonio and Kenesha did not involve parents coming into the classroom, yet the parent-teacher-student relationships affected not only the students' participation in the classroom community but also their learning. That was also the case for the students of two primary-grade teachers with whom I worked in Georgia.

School-Home Reading Journals

I learned about genuine family-school partnerships from Betty Shockley and



© SEAN JUSTICE/CONRHS

Barbara Michalove, 1st and 2nd grade teachers (respectively) who invited parents and other family members to join them in teaching their children to read and write.

Betty, Barbara, and I are European American, middle-class, experienced educators who joined in partnership with families in a high-poverty, predominantly black school. To connect home and school literacy learning, Betty and Barbara designed family-school connections including, among other practices, school-home reading journals.

Teachers and families exchanged reading journals all year. Children took home these spiral-bound or sewn notebooks two or three times a week along with books from the classroom libraries. Parents or others in the family sustained a remarkable commitment to read with their children, talk about the books, and write together in the journals.

Betty and Barbara honored the families' investment of time by responding to every entry, as we see from these excerpts from the journal of Lakendra's mother, Janice:

JANICE: In the story "I Can Fly" Lakendra did very good. Her reading was very good. And maybe she's ready to move on to . . . a book with a few more words. If you think so also. (9/30)

BETTY: I agree. She can read more difficult books but like everybody, young readers enjoy reading things that are easy for them too. (10/1)

JANICE: In the story of the Halloween Performance, Lakendra seem to have some problems with many of the words. Maybe she get a story with too many difficult words for her right now. But still I enjoyed her reading. Thank You. Janice (10/2)

BETTY: When you get ready to read together each night, you might begin by

asking Lakendra, Do you want to read your book to me or do you want me to read to you? Sometimes after you read even a more difficult book, she may ask to read it after you. Let her be the leader. One of the most important things about sharing books together is talking about them together. Thanks. (10/3)

JANICE: Lakendra was very excited about the books she chose to read to me. So excited she read them over and over again. And I was so pleased. Maybe last night she did want me to read the story to her I don't know but I will ask her from now on. Because she was a little upset that she didn't know a lot of the words. And I don't ever want her to feel pressured. Thanks. Janice (10/3) (Shockley, Michalove, & Allen, 1995, pp. 42-43)

This kind of extended written communication, which did not involve enlisting parents to solve discipline problems or to sign reading logs, established deep relationships that supported emerging readers and writers at home as well as at school in ways neither teacher nor parent could have accomplished alone. Without ever entering the school, parents became members of the classroom community.

Addressing Cultural Differences

We are all cultural beings shaped by time and place, religion and race, language and gender, and a host of other ongoing influences. In my work with educators, we use a number of strategies as a springboard for conversations among parents and teachers of diverse cultural backgrounds.

For example, drawing maps of childhood neighborhoods, or *memory maps* (Frank, 2003), might take place during a home visit, or in a classroom, or during a whole-school event such as a family night. Each participant draws an annotated map of his or her childhood neighborhood(s). Next, in small groups that include both teachers and families, participants walk one another through their neighborhood maps. Participants



ARTS CORPS PHOTO © SUSIE FITZHUUGH

at one school had had very different childhood experiences: One of us made daily trips to the corner grocery store in Philadelphia; one rarely left the farm until he was in high school; one moved from a small town in Mexico and learned English at the Boys and Girls Club. We were amazed at the differences as well as the similarities (for example, "Back then it was safe for a child to go to the store alone").

Neighborhood maps may lead to stories of schooling. Each teacher and parent writes down or draws two memories of schooling, one positive and one negative. The sharing of these stories is often quite intense. It's important for parents to know that teachers have both kinds of memories; many parents may believe that all teachers had only positive, successful school experiences. Conversely, teachers need to learn about parents' positive memories as well as the "ghosts at the table," Sara Lawrence-Lightfoot's (2003) expression for those memories from their own schooling that haunt parents and hover over the conference table when parents and teachers try to talk about a student.

A third and potentially deeper exploration of cultural understanding occurs through developing cultural memoirs. Family members—including students—and teachers can ask themselves, Who am I as a cultural being and what are the influences in my life that have made me who I am? These are some ways to approach this project with families:

■ *Read and discuss cultural memoirs.* A great place to start is by reading and discussing memoirs deeply contextualized in time and place, such as *All Over But the Shoutin'*, by Rick Bragg (Pantheon, 1997), or *The House on Mango Street*, by Sandra Cisneros (Vintage, 1989). Busy parents and teachers may appreciate shorter memoirs from popular magazines, television biopics, or radio broadcasts such as National Public Radio's StoryCorps.

■ *Gather photographs and other cultural artifacts.* Go through those boxes, albums, and digital files asking, What were my cultural influences in terms of race, social class, gender, ethnicity, geographic region, religion, nationality, language/dialect, sexual orientation, schooling, physical or mental health or ability, and family structure?

■ *Share cultural memoirs.* Create a form to represent your multicultural self, such as a poem, scrapbook, tele-novela, photo essay, iMovie, or picture book. Some teachers and parents create classroom coffee house atmospheres and invite families in during the school day, in the evening, or on Saturday to share memoirs. Find out from parents what works for them, and consider holding two or three events so everyone can participate. You might plan one meeting for adults only, but remember that students love hearing their parents' and teachers' stories, too.

Educators and family members begin to understand cultural differences when they share their lives and make connections that build a foundation of respect

and trust. When we make culture central to creating family-school partnerships, we acknowledge differences with respect, marvel at similarities, and open up dialogue about how to support each student as a unique learner.

A Starting Point

We've examined funds of knowledge, home visits, photography, reading journals, and other ways teachers have engaged families in creating positive learning experiences for students at home and in the classroom. Any of these

How will you create opportunities with families?

practices could be a starting point. But let me suggest another logical place to start. Go back to that list you made of your school's parent involvement activities: Builds Deep Relationships; Supports Student Learning; Does Neither (But We Keep Doing It Anyway).

What are you already doing that you can build on? What might you do with your equivalent of Uptown High School's Mardi Gras Carnival—that fun tradition that doesn't really build relationships or support student learning? In addition to striving for high parent participation in conferences as Midtown Elementary does, what if you held student-led conferences, focusing only on student learning? How could you involve parents in the preparation for a Technology Night event? Perhaps students could interview their parents and grandparents about changes in technology in their lifetimes, how they use technology in their jobs, and the

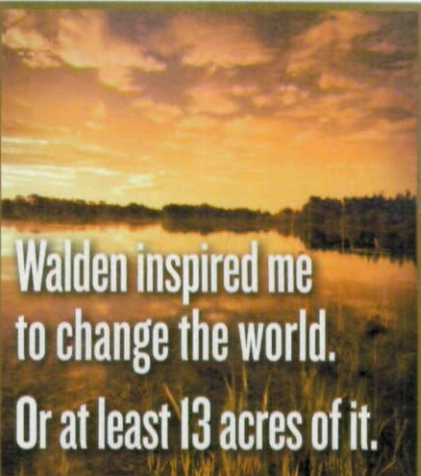
pros and cons of various aspects of technology. Parents might engage with students in studying the effects of technology on global warming by surveying their home, work, and community settings to assess how much energy is used to run computers, cell phones, and other technologies.

How will you create opportunities with families that really improve and deepen student learning? **EL**

References

- Allen, J., Fabregas, V., Hankins, K., Hull, G., Labbo, L., Lawson, H., et al. (2002). PhOLKS lore: Learning from photographs, families, and children. *Language Arts*, 79(4), 312–322.
- Frank, C. (2003). Mapping our stories: Teachers' reflections on themselves as writers. *Language Arts*, 80(3), 185–195.
- Henderson, A., & Mapp, K. (2002). *A new wave of evidence: The impact of school, family, and community connections on student achievement*. Austin, TX: Southwest Educational Development Laboratory.
- González, N., Moll, L., & Amanti, C. (Eds.). (2005). *Funds of knowledge: Theorizing practices in households, communities, and classrooms*. Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum.
- Lawrence-Lightfoot, S. (2003). *The essential conversation: What parents and teachers can learn from each other*. New York: Random House.
- Mattingly, D. J., Radmila, P., McKenzie, T. L., Rodriguez, J. L., & Kayzar, B. (2002). Evaluating evaluations: The case of parent involvement programs. *Review of Educational Research*, 72(4), 549–576.
- Murphy, P. (1994). Antonio: My student, my teacher. *Language Arts*, 1(2), 75–88.
- Shockley, B., Michalove, B., & Allen, J. (1995). *Engaging families: Connecting home and school literacy communities*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.

JoBeth Allen is Professor, Department of Language and Literacy Education, University of Georgia, Athens; jobethal@uga.edu. She is the author of *Creating Welcoming Schools: A Practical Guide to Home-School Partnerships with Diverse Families* (Teachers College Press, 2007).



Walden inspired me
to change the world.
Or at least 13 acres of it.

Walden M.S. in Education graduate and current Ed.D. student, **Rebecca McLelland-Crawley**, is making one small part of the world a better place. Since 2004, she and her high school science students have been restoring Willow Pond, a polluted pond near their school. "Walden inspired me to make a difference," Rebecca said. "If I can get kids excited about saving a 13-acre pond, maybe they'll be nicer to the rest of the planet."

Walden University is an accredited institution with 38 years of experience in distance learning and over 29,000 education alumni and students. Our College of Education offers a wide range of online degrees and specializations, all designed to help you gain the knowledge and confidence to achieve your vision of success. Just as Rebecca has found her success at Willow Pond.

For more of
Rebecca's story, go to
WaldenStories.com.



The Richard W. Riley
College of Education and Leadership

WALDEN UNIVERSITY

ONLINE PROGRAMS
FOR EDUCATORS

Bachelor's • Master's • Doctoral
1-888-219-5475 WaldenU.edu

Walden University is accredited by The Higher Learning Commission and is a member of the North Central Association. www.ncahlc.org 1-312-263-0456.

A MEMBER OF THE LAUREATE INTERNATIONAL UNIVERSITIES NETWORK

**ATTEND A FREE
INFORMATION SESSION**

To learn more, go to WaldenU.edu/infosessions
or call 1-888-219-5475 to speak with
an enrollment advisor today.

Copyright of Educational Leadership is the property of Association for Supervision & Curriculum Development and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.