

# A GUIDE TO SCHOOL-COMMUNITY BEST PRACTICES



Produced by the School-Community Connections  
Subcommittee of the Student Attendance Task Force

A Project of the Los Angeles County  
Education Coordinating Council

[www.educationcoordinatingcouncil.com](http://www.educationcoordinatingcouncil.com)

May 2013

## Introduction

This Guide to School-Community Best Practices serves as a follow up to *A Comprehensive Approach to Improving Student Attendance in Los Angeles County* released by the School Attendance Task Force (hereinafter “Task Force”) in February 2012.<sup>1</sup> In its report, the Task Force highlighted holistic and comprehensive models to address the root causes of attendance challenges and to build multi-stakeholder solutions to this issue in Los Angeles County. Since the Report was largely focused on recommendations for entities like school districts, law enforcement agencies and the courts, the Task Force recognized that a greater understanding of the role that the community – including community based organizations (CBO’s), community members, and parents – could play in promoting positive attendance was key. As such, “creating strategies for increasing connections between schools districts and available community resources” was one of the key implementation steps in the Report. This Best Practices Guide serves as a first step towards that implementation goal.

School – community linkages and partnerships have been identified as essential to “improving schools, strengthening neighborhoods, and leading to a marked reduction in young people’s problems.”<sup>2</sup> As noted by the Center for Mental Health in Schools at UCLA, schools are located in communities, yet are often isolated from community members and much-needed resources for their students; families live in neighborhoods, but often remain disconnected from one another or the schools that their children attend; and community agencies like CBO’s, youth centers, and local businesses often remain fragmented, despite their major stake in the education system. Fostering lasting school-community partnerships is critical to bridge these divides and to connect these important players who are all invested in shared goals such as the success of young people in school. Additionally, as budget woes continue to impact school funding across the state and county, creating meaningful partnerships and tapping into unused community resources has never been more imperative to promoting student attendance and achievement.

The range and list of possible school-community partnerships is extensive. While we cite related resources on this topic throughout, the goal of this paper is not to provide an exhaustive inventory of all options to enhance school-community partnerships. Rather, it is an effort to identify and highlight a few important models with local examples that can serve as an initial resource for school districts looking to implement these models. Specifically, the three valuable models or principles regarding school-community partnerships that this guide illuminates are:

- 1) Comprehensive Needs Assessments / Community Mapping,
- 2) Community Schools, and
- 3) Building Parent Leadership.

<sup>1</sup>Report available at [www.educationcoordinatingcouncil.org](http://www.educationcoordinatingcouncil.org).

<sup>2</sup>Center for Mental Health in Schools at UCLA. “School-Community Partnerships: A Guide.”

It must be noted that to comprehensively address attendance and create meaningful community partnerships, leadership is needed at all levels of a school district, from school-site teachers and administrators, to Superintendents and School Board Members. Strong leadership and support from top district administrators often bolsters implementation at school-sites. Much has been written about the importance of school and district-wide leadership, especially the leadership of school-site administrators in supporting their teachers, students and families, and district-wide leadership in supporting their school sites and promoting a vision for community partnership.<sup>3</sup> However, since this guide focuses on tools most applicable for school-site staff, all of the principles of school leadership and district-wide leadership are not explicitly delineated. Rather, we simply note the breadth of research on leadership and the importance of it in implementing any of the identified strategies.

## *Models for School-Community Partnerships*

### **1) COMPREHENSIVE NEEDS ASSESSMENT / COMMUNITY MAPPING**

School-community partnerships are geographic in nature, as they involve connecting with specific resources and stakeholders in a geographic area – often a neighborhood – surrounding a school or group of schools. Performing a comprehensive needs assessment, or community mapping, is a first critical step in building effective school-community partnerships. This type of community mapping can be conducted in various ways – through technology and geo-spatial mapping or interviewing the community, for example – and still meet its goals.

The principles of community mapping are rooted in the methodology called asset-based community development (ABCD), which seeks to identify and understand the strengths in a community in order to improve it; ABCD recognizes that local assets, whether skills of local residents or the strengths of local associations or open spaces, are key building blocks in community development.<sup>4</sup> Applied to education, the ABCD approach is about an intimate understanding of the community surrounding a school (or schools) and a commitment to building relationships with identified assets in order to enhance student success.

#### *The Advancement Project: Healthy Cities and Community-Engaged Mapping*

- Healthy Cities provides the largest database of localized data and community services in Los Angeles County that allow users – whether schools or CBO’s or community members – to conduct research on their community (visualizing and manipulating community data through maps), to search for local services, and to connect with resources.<sup>5</sup>
- Healthy Cities is a critical resource to LA County schools, parents and organizations when seeking to understand the community surrounding a school.
- Community-Engaged Mapping (CEM), which is a community-based data collection method of the Advancement Project Urban Peace project collects neighborhood level data from participants on issues related to the health and physical environment of a community. Drawing upon mapping principles from Healthy Cities, the Advancement Project’s Los Angeles office created the CEM tool to “situate the challenges faced by communities in the places and spaces in which they occur, obtaining community-based data to inform place-based issue analysis, planning, policy and intervention.”<sup>6</sup>

<sup>3</sup>Dawn Anderson-Butcher & Deb Ashton, Innovative Models of Collaboration to Serve Children, Youths, Families, and Communities, 26 Children & Schools, 1, 39-53 (2004); Mark R. Warren, Soo Hong, Carolyn L. Rubin & P.S. Uy, Beyond the bake sale: A community-based relational approach to parent engagement in schools, 111 Teachers College, Columbia University, 2209-2254 (2009)

<sup>4</sup>ABCD developed from John Kretzmann and John L. McKnight of Northwestern University’s Asset-Based Community Development Institute: [www.abcdinstitute.org](http://www.abcdinstitute.org)

<sup>5</sup>Advancement Project’s Healthy City resource: <http://www.advancementprojectca.org/?q=ap-ca-healthy-city-org>

<sup>6</sup>From Caneel Fraser, Senior Policy Associate with the Advancement Project’s Urban Peace project

- In particular, a CEM exercise to improve education involved asking community members, particularly youth that attend school in a focus area, to identify things like the critical environmental design issues in their community that spur violence or deter school attendance as well as identify the place-based community assets that help deter violence in their community. This Community-Engaged Mapping approach was used by the Advancement Project in Los Angeles' Belmont/Rampart neighborhood to inform safe passages program planning to promote attendance by ensuring young people had a safe route to and from school.<sup>7</sup>

Los Angeles Education Partnership (LAEP) community mapping through community schools:

- Los Angeles Education Partnership (LAEP) has also incorporated a type of community mapping in their work on building community schools. When creating the community school model at Edison Middle School (described further in the next section), the LAEP Site Coordinator at the school began by talking with everyone she could to get an overall picture of the school and the needs and assets of the surrounding community. She then started to align available assets / resources (ex: student clubs, youth mentors, parent engagement) with existing needs, creating additional resources, where needed, by developing strong community relationships.

Mustangs on the Move (MOTM) collaboration in Pasadena:

- Mustangs on the Move (MOTM) is a collaboration of Pasadena nonprofit organizations, high school students and community members who are working together to provide after-school programming at John Muir High School in Northwest Pasadena. The school is located in a commercially blighted area of the community with few resources for teens. Flintridge Center (describe more fully) played a pivotal role in identifying community resources surrounding the school, and then mobilizing the community effort to provide extracurricular activities on the campus and has provided financial and in-kind support to build the infrastructure and sustain the collaboration. Flintridge Center and mentoring agencies in Pasadena and Altadena are helping to turn around the lives of troubled youth through programs that match them with volunteer adult mentors that serve as positive role models. They offer encouragement and guidance to help young people see themselves in a more self-affirming light and stay motivated and focused on their education. The support and guidance help keep the students on track so that they graduate and go on to lead productive lives.
- LaWayne Williams, Program Director (LaWayne@Flintridge.org )

## 2) COMMUNITY SCHOOLS

Across the country, organizations and schools are implementing a “Community School” model to more effectively serve their students and families. The Coalition for Community Schools defines a community school as “both a place and a set of partnerships between the school and other community resources. Its integrated focus on academics, services, supports and opportunities leads to improved students learning, stronger families, and healthier communities. Community Schools organize and leverage the resources of the community around student success.”<sup>8</sup> The work of Community Schools is driven by the following core beliefs: a) communities and schools are fundamentally and positively interconnected; b) schools can make a difference in the lives of ALL children. The quality of the schools matters; c) Children do better when families do better; and d) The development of the whole child is a critical factor for student success.<sup>9</sup> Moreover, a community school is typically characterized by things like extended services, extended hours, extended relationships and a strategy for organizing the resources within a community around promoting student success.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>7</sup>Advancement Project's Urban Peace Safe School Passages: <http://www.advancementprojectca.org/?q=node/209>

<sup>8</sup>Information on LAEP Community Schools work is available at: [http://www.laep.org/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=63&Itemid=75](http://www.laep.org/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=63&Itemid=75)

<sup>9</sup>Id.

<sup>10</sup>Presentation on Community School Model Elements, prepared by LAEP, January 2013

### Los Angeles Education Partnership (“LAEP”) Community School model:

- LAEP’s community school model,<sup>11</sup> which it is championing in high need areas in Los Angeles Unified School District, includes the following key features and strategies<sup>12</sup>:
  - Collaborative: Seeks to integrate the local community with improving the school academic environment
  - Site Coordinator: Is essential to the implementation of a community school and is located on site to help drive the work, and build/maintain school/community connections and relationships
  - Stakeholders: All stakeholders are brought to the table and involved in the work
  - Data Driven Change: Data is used as a key factor to identify and address needs, drive policy and program development and track progress
  - Strategies: 1) Resource Council / Work Groups (regular meeting of stakeholders serving school), 2) Parent Engagement (Parent Leaders, promotora model of peer-to-peer learning and supports), 3) Academic Supports (targeting under-performing 9th grade students with after school and parent outreach), 4) Developmental Assets and resilience work (develop common language and strength based approach), 5) Youth Mentors (upper-class mentor and orientation program for 9th graders)
- Although the LAEP Community School model centers on a site coordinator, the real focus of this work is how a community school uses specific strategies to bring stakeholders together and then identify needs and resources to serve the school community. If a school is not able to hire a dedicated on-site coordinator, existing school staff can try to serve this role.
- Edison Middle School has had a LAEP Community School Coordinator since the 2010-2011 school year. Highlights of Edison’s success include:
  - Attendance rates above 95% in 2010-2011 and 2011-2012 school years and
  - Zero out of school suspensions in 2011-2012 through implementation of School-Wide Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports,
  - 90 point API increase from 2009-2010 to 2011-2012,
  - Monthly Parent classroom observations to foster parent feedback and raise parent awareness.<sup>13</sup>
- Other LAEP community schools are at San Fernando Middle School and Fremont High School
- Key Contacts: Robyn Stack Reagan, Director of Community Schools, LAEP (rreagan@laep.org)

### Downey Unified School District-led partnership:

- While not an explicit community school in the commonly understood sense, the Downey Unified School District (DUSD), local government agencies (Downey Police Department, elected officials, etc) and community organizations have committed to working together to support positive change in Downey and provide comprehensive and coordinated services to young people. This collaboration has contributed to building long-term caring, trusting relationships between schools and families.
- Regular meetings are held within and among groups to identify areas of need, encourage information-sharing and help close gaps in communication. Two examples include:
  - Downey Police Dept/DUSD Safe Schools Meetings: Vice Principals from the middle and high schools in DUSD, Dr. Jagielski, Probation Officers, Community Service Officers, and Officers from the Crime Impact Unit meet regularly to share information and look at trends in the community
  - Gangs Out Of Downey (G.O.O.D.): In place since 1989, approximately 25 people from the city, school district and community meet monthly to share information and resources to address issues related to gang activity
- These type of partnerships have resulted in a number of collaborative and effective programs that embody the principles of community schools:
  - True Lasting Connections (TLC) Family Resource Center: Operates under the umbrella of the DUSD and works with more than 50 agencies to provide physical, emotional and intellectual support to families (medical services, vision care, dental care, parental education, food and clothing, counseling, low cost health insurance enrollment)
  - The Downey School Attendance Review Board (SARB) was an awardee of the Model SARB Recognition Program in 2011. Downey’s multi-disciplinary SARB panel includes representation from schools, law enforcement, welfare agencies, physical and mental health personnel, and

<sup>11</sup>Id.

<sup>12</sup>Id.

<sup>13</sup>Edison Middle School Parent Classroom Observation Form and other related school documents available at [www.educationcoordinatingcouncil.org](http://www.educationcoordinatingcouncil.org) (through the SATF page)

community-based organizations. The Downey SARB was recognized for attendance improvement and dropout prevention by taking positive approaches to help students and families improve attendance, rather than just seeking to punish offenders.

- By using a collaborative approach and building effective school-community partnerships, some of the positive outcomes in Downey include a 91% graduation rate, a decrease in expulsions and suspension days by 70% and 45% respectively since 2003, and an increase in families receiving services through local community organizations.
- Contact: Dr. Robert Jagielski, Director, Student Services for the Downey Unified School District (rjagielski@dusd.net)

#### *Green Dot Public Schools Community Schools Project at Locke Family of Schools*

- Green Dot Public Schools (GDPS) believes that to improve student achievement, it is critical to address the barriers to learning that stand between our students and the education they need to succeed in college, leadership and life. By providing coordinated and comprehensive academic, social and health services onsite, GDPS increases the likelihood that youth and their families will access these services, reach their full potential and succeed in school.
- Based on a community assessment that engaged students, parents, and administrators, the school community's needs and current gaps in service were identified and prioritized. Programs and services are pursued based on the highest priority needs.
- Service partnerships are researched, vetted, and managed by the Community School Manager in pursuit of strong program performance and to ease the workload of school-site administrators.
- All service partners are contracted annually and held to specific program goals. Performance is tracked and monitored regularly. Performance goals focus on both inputs and program outcomes.
- Services and programs meet the needs of students and their families. Community members are also invited to access services. Services are either integrated into the school day or provided after school. Programs and services vary from pregnancy prevention, truancy intervention, and recreational services (e.g., dance, painting) to adult ESL classes, parent education programming, and a resource navigator that connects individuals to free and low-cost services in the community.
- Key contact: Melissa Pena, Full-Service Community School Manager, Green Dot Public Schools (melissa.pena@greendot.org)

#### *Promise Neighborhood model in LA County (Youth Policy Institute)*

- Promise Neighborhoods is President Obama's signature education and poverty initiative to transform schools and communities into vibrant centers of excellence and opportunity. The Youth Policy Institute (YPI) is the lead agency for the Los Angeles Promise Neighborhood that has been awarded \$30 million by the U.S. Department of Education.
- The centerpiece of the Los Angeles Promise Neighborhood (LAPN) is an innovative public-private partnership that blends diverse funding streams around a core set of outcomes and objectives.
- The LAPN is transforming 19 neighborhood schools into full-service community schools while opening six Promise Neighborhood Centers and dozens of satellite centers. YPI and partners will serve 12,820 youth each year with wrap-around services that include prenatal and early childhood development, extended learning time, linked learning, technology programs and computer centers, summer and bridge programs, blended learning, college preparation, career development, job training, dropout and gang prevention, reconnections for out-of-school youth, and family support services such as case management, financial literacy, legal services, and support with basic needs.
- LAPN is using the revolutionary Efforts to Outcomes (ETO) longitudinal data management system across all partners that assesses client need, tracks progress, documents outcomes and results, while maintaining required client confidentiality.
- LAPN's rigorous planning process gathered 3,444 surveys, while conducting 29 facilitated focus group sessions, 27 work group sessions, and 6 asset mapping activities.
- For more information, please visit: [www.ypiusa.org/lapn/](http://www.ypiusa.org/lapn/)

### 3) BUILDING PARENT LEADERSHIP

A critical element to engaging the community in student attendance and success is to build meaningful school-family partnerships so that families and parents feel wanted, informed, empowered, and recognized for their potential.<sup>14</sup> This means going well beyond “parent tokenism” where family involvement may be limited to a few representatives who are needed to “sign off” on school decisions and give legitimacy to school policies. Rather, it means a sustained commitment to recognize the power of all parents and to create systems and structures that include them, involve them, and further empower them to be leaders in the school. Various local examples follow<sup>15</sup>:

The impact of parental involvement cannot be understated, and studies have linked strong parental involvement to reduced dropout rates, higher graduation rates, better attitude and conduct and higher academic achievement. Illustrating this point, a nationwide study of Title I schools showed that students whose teachers had frequent contact with parents with face to face meetings, home visits, and two-way communication had reading and math scores 40-50% higher than students whose teachers had infrequent communications with their families<sup>16</sup>. Parental involvement in the schools is also a prerequisite for parental leadership. Parents who are familiar with the school officials, are involved in their children’s education, and understand the educational system are far more likely to become involved as leaders in the school. Engaged parents are also able to organize the community and ally with other organizations to advocate for school reform and broader community issues. Dr. Katie McGee, superintendent of schools in Brunswick County, NC refers to parental involvement as “planting the seed” for a stronger and more involved school community<sup>17</sup>.

#### *LAUSD Garfield High School: Transforming Parent Engagement*

- Garfield High School offers a model of an individual school that has invested in parent engagement to improve the overall health of the school. Strategic parent engagement at Garfield High School really began under the leadership of Assistant Principal Ramiro Rubalcaba.
- Garfield began with parents who were already involved, provided them with uniforms (polo shirts) so they would be recognized as parent volunteers, and strengthened their role by having them be a visible presence by walking around the campus and visiting classrooms.
- A parent office was provided at the school and a main parent coordinator designated. Soon, as the program grew, parents received training by the assistant principal or principal on how to effectively work at the school, and were then stationed throughout the school campus near a person with a radio. Parents started serving as the eyes and ears of the school administration, getting to know the students and the school dynamics intimately.
- To foster the flow of information, parent volunteers at Garfield would have a monthly breakfast meeting with the principal to share their ideas and concerns for the school. While present on campus, parents also help support student recognition by assisting (ex: decorating for assemblies, making certificates) in positive behavior celebrations and other activities that honor student achievement. Furthermore, a parent center was established at the school that provided a range of classes available to all parents. Last year, it is estimated that the parent volunteers provided \$56,000 worth of free service to the school, which totaled over 700 volunteer hours.
- Aurora Mellado, Dean of Students, Garfield High School, 323-981-5526

#### *Alhambra Unified School District’s Gateway to Success Parent University:*

- Alhambra Unified School District (AUSD) recognizes that meeting the myriad of social and emotional needs of youth and their families is critical to success, and that strong parent involvement in school is associated with children’s positive development regardless of SES, ethnic origins or parent education. Thus AUSD established the Gateway to Success program and the resulting Parent University project, in partnership with the Alhambra Police Department, as a way to connect effectively with the diverse populations of families, foster deeper parent

<sup>14</sup>ERIC Clearinghouse on Urban Education (1994). School-Family Partnerships. In Strong Families, Strong Schools at [http://www.eric.ed.gov/ERICDocs/data/ericdocs2sql/content\\_storage\\_01/0000019b/80/15/bc/13.pdf](http://www.eric.ed.gov/ERICDocs/data/ericdocs2sql/content_storage_01/0000019b/80/15/bc/13.pdf)

<sup>15</sup>For further examples of parental involvement programs across the country, see Flamboyan Foundation. (2012). Comprehensive Family Engagement Partnership Pilot 2011-2012 Early Highlights.

<sup>16</sup>Westmoreland, Helen. Family Engagement that Drives Student Achievement. Broad Academy, 9/22/2011

<sup>17</sup>Berg, A., Melavile, A., & Blank, M. J. (2006). Community and Family Engagement: Principals Share What Works. Washington, DC: Coalition for Community Schools.

involvement in the school and the students lives, and simultaneously provide parents with the knowledge, skills and support to overcome many of the obstacles faced by them and their families.<sup>18</sup>

- The Parent University offers yearlong workshops, presentations and parenting classes that cover topics ranging from laws that impact minors to bullying to internet safety to the CAHSEE exit exam to positive discipline. Classes are offered at the school and led by professionals like counselors, school psychologists and child development specialists.
- The success of the program: Data gathered through surveys and focus groups show that barriers to school/family/community partnerships have decreased, and in focus groups AUSD families shared their increasing willingness to engage at school
- To help sustain ongoing parent involvement, AUSD has trained its staff in how to effectively work with families, including cultural competency, and has established district policy requiring parent or caregiver participation.
- Contact: Laurel Bear, Director of Student Services / Gateway to Success (bear\_laurel@ausd.us)

#### Community Asset Development Redefining Education's (CADRE's) Parent Empowerment Academy:

- Lastly, it is not just schools and school districts that play an important role in building parent leadership in education. Nonprofit organizations also step in to help train, engage and empower parents to be involved in the school, often when the school itself has either been unable or unwilling to work with them or when parents want to be involved but do not know how.
- A local example is the organization CADRE's (Community Asset Development Redefining Education's) Parent Empowerment Academy and organizing work. CADRE, as part of its work to empower and organize parents in South Los Angeles, holds parent academies. The CADRE Parent Academy is held in weekly evening sessions over several months, where parents learn to become advocates to improve their children's education. CADRE organizes from the Human Rights principles that every parent / guardian has the right to full participation and every child has the right to dignity and to reach their full potential educationally. CADRE trains parents in how to analyze such things as student discipline data and how to become engaged in improving the school climate of the school their child attends.
- For more information on CADRE's work, please see: [www.cadre-la.org](http://www.cadre-la.org)<sup>19</sup>.

#### Parent Institute for Quality Education (PIQE)

- Parents who understand the education system are far more likely to be involved as leaders in the school. PIQE is a statewide research-based and comprehensive parent involvement program in California founded on this idea.
- PIQE offers a 9-week parent education program that aims to inform parents about the requirements for college admission, educate them on how to support their children through high school, and develop a college-going culture among families. Class sessions are taught in English, Spanish, and twelve other languages are offered in morning and evenings.
- Parents who graduate from PIQE receive a certificate that allows each of their children admission to at least one CSU, granted the student meets the minimum requirements for admission.
- <http://www.piqe.org/> Maria Elena Meraz, Executive Director, PIQE-Los Angeles [mmeraz@piqe.org](mailto:mmeraz@piqe.org)

### **Conclusion**

This guide is in no way exhaustive, but is meant as a first step of highlighting exemplary local examples of how strong community and school connections can promote student success, including improved attendance. While it is clear that our schools and their surrounding communities are resource rich, connecting these resources to a school and vice versa has historically been a challenge, and improving this connection is a goal of the Task Force. The above examples highlight key strategies to make that needed connection.

These local examples embody the principles of community mapping, community schools and building parent leadership and serve as a first step for educators to engage with colleagues and think creatively about improvements they can make at their school site in partnership with the community. We also encourage all of our educator collaborators to share information with the Task Force, so we can in turn share it through the Education Coordinating Council website.

<sup>18</sup>Alhambra Unified School District website: [http://www.alhambra.k12.ca.us/apps/pages/index.jsp?uREC\\_ID=118358&type=d&pREC\\_ID=248594](http://www.alhambra.k12.ca.us/apps/pages/index.jsp?uREC_ID=118358&type=d&pREC_ID=248594)

<sup>19</sup>For more information on grassroots and community organizations involving parents in school reform, see McGuinn, P., & Kelly, A. P. (2012). Parent Power: Grassroots Activism and K-12 Education Reform. Washington, DC: American Enterprise Institute.