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PARENTS AND SCHOOLS:

A CRITICAL RESOURCE LINK

**A Report to
the
MASSACHUSETTS BOARD OF EDUCATION**

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Prepared by

The Office of Community Education

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I. INTRODUCTION

A. Research on Parent Involvement

Research over the past decade has conclusively indicated that parent involvement in education plays a major role in educational effectiveness:

Children whose families are involved in school activities and provide reinforcement and support for learning in the home are more likely to succeed in school.

Increased parent involvement has been found to improve dramatically the academic achievement of students who were previously failing. However, without systematic outreach on the part of schools, parents of the children who are most academically at-risk are least likely to be involved. At the same time, research indicates that schools with the greatest number of academically at-risk children tend to have lower levels of parent involvement.

B. Parent Involvement as a Board of Education Priority

The Massachusetts Board of Education has consistently demonstrated its support for increasing parent involvement in the schools. Following the passage of this state's pioneering Chapter 766 legislation, the Board of Education adopted regulations that formally recognized the role of parents as equal partners in decisions about educational services for children. In a listing of eight goals in the Board's 1979 **Policy Paper on Community Education**, the Board called for "opportunities for parents to become more involved in the education of their children and in the life of their school."

Guidelines developed in connection with Chapters 188 and 727 also strongly reinforce the theme of parent involvement. Through the Department's implementation of school improvement councils, Carnegie Schools, Opportunity Schools, early childhood programs, and other programs, there are requirements for meaningful involvement of parents in decision making, school governance, and educational programming.

Parent Involvement guidelines also are evident in other Department of Education programs, most notably in Chapter 1, bilingual education, and the school improvement and magnet education assistance components of Chapter 636.

C. Department of Education and Office of Community Education Activity to Promote Parent Involvement

Throughout the last decade, Department units have increasingly focused on involving parents in education. Chapter I support to Parent Advisory Councils has emphasized expanded outreach to parents and Chapter 636 has funded parent information and outreach centers. Dropout prevention, health education, early childhood, special education, and vocational

education programs have expanded parent involvement in their decision making processes and have made parent participation a critical aspect of program evaluation.

The Office of Community Education has placed a major emphasis on encouraging local education agencies to promote the involvement of parents as an educational resource that can help to ensure success for all children. Appreciating the challenges that schools can face in establishing links with parents who have been underrepresented in schools and who may be educationally, economically, and socially disadvantaged, the current focus of this Office has shifted to the development and dissemination of strategies that bring families into the educational process as a way of helping to break intergenerational cycles of school failure.

These strategies involve new approaches to parent outreach in which schools become partners with community leaders and organizations in order to reach out to parents who have been uninvolved in their children's education. These strategies also are addressing ways of restructuring school attitudes, practices, and policies to make them more "user friendly" for underrepresented families.

D. Coordinating and Strengthening the Department's Efforts

In the summer of 1988, the Commissioner of Education requested the Office of Community Education to coordinate information on the Department's approaches to promoting parent involvement in education, especially among parents of the most academically at risk students. This coordination project had several goals:

- Enhance awareness among units of the Department of approaches that were effective in increasing parent involvement and thus enable these units to benefit from each others' experience.
- Identify and share strategies that were effective in increasing the involvement of hard-to-reach parents in their children's education.
- Strengthen the capacity of Department staff and local practitioners to involve more parents in their children's education and develop new approaches for reaching parents who are underrepresented in schools and least likely to benefit from existing outreach strategies of schools.

This report reviews the activity of the Office of Community Education in promoting these goals.

II. REACHING OUT TO UNDER-INVOLVED PARENTS

Recognizing that conventional approaches to parent involvement may serve to perpetuate rather than break the intergenerational cycle of school failure, our search for and development of new approaches to parent involvement included research, capacity and awareness building, and dissemination activities.

A. Research and Capacity Building: September 1987 - December 1988

1. Development of an Information Bank on parent involvement

The Information Bank serves to expand the Department's access to state-of-the-art information on parent involvement and ability to provide technical assistance and conceptual leadership to local practitioners. The contents of the Information Bank include:

- A summary of the **research** linking parent involvement and student achievement.
- A file that includes **mini-case descriptions** of 100 parent involvement practices in 60 Massachusetts communities.
- A resource **library** with local program descriptions, nationwide, and parent involvement handbooks and guidelines from other state education agencies.
- A file consisting of approximately 50 to 60 **resource people** across Massachusetts who are knowledgeable about parent involvement: parent outreach and involvement practitioners in local school systems; parent organization leaders; and researchers and program developers in higher education institutions.

2. State-of-the-art and resources survey

The Information Bank was developed through two systematic information gathering activities:

- (a) **Statewide practices survey. (Fall 1987)** One hundred mini-case studies on a spectrum of local parent involvement practices were generated through responses to a questionnaire that was sent to local PTSA chairpeople statewide by the Office of Community Education in collaboration with the Massachusetts Parent, Teacher, and Student Association (MPTSA).
- (b) **State and national resources survey. (Fall 1987-Winter 1988)** This survey yielded up-to-date information on in-state and national resource organizations and materials. It also provided information on programs and strategies used by other state education agencies working to promote the involvement of underrepresented parents.

B. Identification of Strategies and Implementation Issues. (September 1988-March 1989)

The information gathering activities described above provided us with a picture of "what is," i.e., the current state-of-the-art in home-school collaboration. However, a critical question emerged and remains: Does the state-of-the-art provide appropriate opportunities for **all parents** to be involved, including underrepresented, often disadvantaged hard-to-reach parents?

To answer this question, we turned to the practitioners of parent outreach: school and community-based parent outreach workers; managers and staff of DOE units that administer programs that have a parent involvement component; and parent involvement researchers and program developers in institutions of higher education. The insights and experience of these practitioners provided a rich source of knowledge about what works in terms of efforts to include all parents, the barriers that prevent hard-to-reach parents from being involved, and the limitations of conventional and traditional approaches.

During the fall and winter of 1988-89, we conducted interviews and working meetings with several groups of parent involvement practitioners.

1. Interviews with Department of Education units.

Other Department units that administer programs with parent involvement components shared their experience on effective parent outreach practices, especially in programs targeted at at-risk students and their families. Discussions were held with the following units: Adult Education, Bilingual Education, Chapter 1, Chapter 636, Early Childhood, Educational Equity, Nutrition, Occupational Education, and Special Education. (Please see Attachment A)

2. Interviews with representatives of institutions of higher education.

Meetings with parent involvement program developers and researchers from Boston University, Tufts University and Wheelock College increased our awareness of the cutting edge research on parent involvement. These meetings also provided information on model programs of parent outreach in which these institutions were involved and with which they were familiar.

3. Working meetings with school-based parent outreach practitioners.

Two meetings with school-based practitioners were held in November of 1988. These meetings involved teams of principals, teachers and parents from twenty-one communities including: Attleboro, Auburn, Brookline, Cambridge, Concord, Easthampton, Fall River, Lawrence, New Bedford, Northboro, Pittsfield, Sheffield, Somerville, Springfield, Swampscott, Taunton, Uxbridge, Waltham, Watertown, Westport and Worcester. Teams from these communities shared strategies and programs related to home-school communication and outreach to "hard-to-reach" parents.

4. Working meeting with community-based family outreach practitioners.

Additional insights into strategies for involving hard-to-reach parents in their children's education were offered at a meeting in March 1989 at the Woburn Council for Social Concern that was attended by social service agency representatives from Woburn, Lawrence, Lynn, and neighboring communities. These individuals shared information on the approaches they use to connect with

parents and to increase these parents' comfort and involvement with the schools. They described a broad range of non-traditional, personalized strategies that are aimed at individual parents and small neighborhood groups of parents.

**C. Building Awareness and Disseminating New Prototypes of Parent Outreach.
(January 1989 - Ongoing)**

Our research of current practices and discussions with practitioners yielded examples and models of programs that can succeed in reaching and involving more parents. In order to promote the adoption of these new models, we continually build awareness through publications, statewide conferences that are co-sponsored by education associations, presentations by Office of Community Education staff at conferences convened by other groups, and through collaboration with the media.

1. Publications

The following publications have been developed and disseminated as part of a systematic strategy to increase awareness of both a wider range of roles that parents can play in education and of innovative models of parent outreach.

Handbook on Home-School Collaboration (1988) provides an overview of current research and strategies that schools can use in further developing home-school partnerships and documents twelve examples of successful parent involvement strategies in Massachusetts. The purpose of this booklet is to expand awareness that parental involvement can take many forms and is not limited to traditional in-school activities.

Parent Involvement Toolkit (1988) is a packet of idea sheets for teachers on how traditional forms of home-school collaboration, e.g., open houses, parent-teacher conferences, etc., can be enhanced to include more parents by recognizing the needs of single and working parents, language minority families, and others who may be hindered from more active participation.

Focus on Parents: Strategies for Increasing the Involvement of Underrepresented Families in Education (1989) provides twenty-six mini-prototypes of strategies that use the community as a resource in reaching out to parents and involving them in their children's education. These community based strategies describe how, by collaborating with community organizations and their leaders, schools can make contact with parents in familiar and comfortable settings. The booklet also provides a summary of research on the links between parent involvement and student achievement and describes a planning process for a schoolwide parent outreach initiative. (Please See Attachment B)

Parent-School Collaboration: A Compendium of Strategies (1990) provides seventy-three programmatic approaches for involving parents

in their children's education. These approaches describe a range of traditional and non-traditional practices educators can use to make the school setting more accessible for and supportive of parental involvement. (Please See Attachment C)

Parents-as-Teachers: A Statewide and National Resource Guide (1990) describes fourteen resource organizations and twenty-one resource materials that provide information on ways that parents can support and reinforce their children's in-school learning through activities both in the school and in the home. (Please See Attachment D)

2. Conferences

The Office of Community Education has built a coalition with the three principals' association and the MPTSA, which for the past two years have cosponsored statewide awareness building conferences on the topic of parent involvement.

Home-School Collaboration, held in April 1989, attracted over 250 participants and showcased 17 programs that involved parents in a broad spectrum of roles ranging from working individually with children at home to participating in school personnel hiring decisions. This conference was designed to demonstrate the many forms that parent involvement can take. Projects from the following communities were showcased: Attleboro, Boston, Belmont, Brookline, Cambridge, Concord, Holyoke, Lynn, New Bedford, Northboro, Sheffield, Springfield, Swampscott, Worcester.

Focus on Parents, held in March 1990, attracted over 350 participants and had a waiting list of double that number. Its objective was to build awareness of approaches to communicating with and involving underrepresented, hard-to-reach, parents through practices such as: using of innovative vehicles for home school communication; restructuring the school setting to make it more "parent friendly;" and collaborating with community-based organizations to link parents with their children's school. The conference program included presentations from 18 projects that illustrated the above approaches from the communities of Boston, Barnstable, Brockton, Cambridge, Fitchburg, Foxboro, Holyoke, Lawrence, Lowell, Northboro, Springfield, and Westwood. Conference participants engaged in small group and whole group problem-solving exercises which tapped the expertise of this diverse audience. Administrators, teachers, parent outreach workers, social service agency workers, and parent organization leaders also collaborated to brainstorm new models of parent outreach and involvement for hard to reach parents.

By design, the 1990 conference drew on parent involvement and outreach practitioners from a range of Department of Education grant programs including Early Childhood, Adult Basic Education, Chapter 1, Bilingual Education, and Chapter 636 Section 1 and Section 8 Parent Information Centers. Presentations were also made by resource organizations such as the Center for Community and Organizational Development at the University of

Massachusetts/Amherst, the Harvard Family Research Project, and the Northeast Regional Resource Center in collaboration with the NETWORK.

3. Workshops at other conferences

Staff from the Department have conducted workshops on involving parents in schools at events such as the annual meetings of the Chapter 1 Statewide PAC, MPTSA, Massachusetts Organization of Citizens for School Improvement (MOCSI), and the principals' associations. The topics of these presentations have included: alternative approaches to parental involvement in decision making; using already active parents to reach out and involve parents; and strengthening the inclusivity and representativeness of school and parent advisory councils.

4. Collaboration with the WCVB-TV "Great Expectations" initiative.

Since Summer, 1989, the Office of Community Education has served as the Department of Education liaison to the WCVB-TV Channel 5 "Great Expectations" public awareness campaign in support of public education. The Office has also served as an informal consultant to this campaign on themes that relate to the roles of parents.

In this capacity, the Office of Community Education collaborated with WCVB-TV in a week of special programming on the theme of "Parents are Teachers, Too." In conjunction with this awareness building initiative, WCVB-TV communicated with school superintendents in its viewing area and identified over 220 contact people who were willing to provide interested parents with information about opportunities to get involved in their children's education. During the "Parents are Teachers, Too" week (January 29-February 2), WCVB-TV staffed its phones and provided to interested parents the names of the contact people in their school system. The Office of Community Education developed and provided to each contact person the Parents as Teachers Resource Guide, described above.

D. Piloting and Assisting in the Implementation of New Models (Fall 1989 - Ongoing)

Drawing on its research and model development, the Office of Community Education provides direct service and technical assistance to several projects.

1. Parent outreach through partnerships with ethnic minority community organizations (1988-1989)

The Office of Community Education collaborated with the Center for Organizational and Community Development (COCD) at the University of Massachusetts/Amherst to develop pilot projects demonstrating how minority community-based organizations can become engaged in involving minority parents more directly in the education of their children. The projects were conducted in Lowell and in Holyoke. The Lowell project focused on outreach to Southeast Asian parents;

the Holyoke project focused on outreach to Latino parents. At both sites, the projects demonstrated that minority community-based organizations can effectively serve as intermediaries between schools and under-involved minority parents. The efforts also succeeded in initiating partnerships between the school systems and participating community-based organizations that have the potential for addressing a range of family needs. The Lowell project succeeded in initiating linkages between the public schools and existing adult education programs such as the Lowell Adult Education Center, the Cambodian Mutual Assistance Association, and the St. Julian Asian Center.

2. Parent outreach through partnerships with adult learning centers 1989-90.

The Office of Community Education, the Bureau of Adult Basic Education, and the Center for Organization and Community Development have joined forces in an effort to demonstrate how a trilateral partnership among the public schools, minority community-based organizations, and adult learning centers can promote intergenerational literacy and serve to involve linguistic minority parents in their children's education. Five regionally representative teams of from four to seven representatives from community organizations, the schools, adult learning centers, and minority community-based organizations have been convened and are being provided with year long training and technical assistance to develop and implement parent outreach action plans. Participating communities include Boston, Fall River, Lawrence, Leominster, and Northampton. This effort is funded by an Adult Basic Education "Special Projects" grant and is intended to develop approaches that can be replicated by adult learning centers statewide.

3. Parent-to-parent outreach: Springfield Public Schools (Spring 1990).

The Springfield School System is in the process of implementing an ambitious systemwide parent involvement policy. As an initial step, it is convening a core group of active parents, the "Parents-Talking-to-Parents Committee," whose charge is to organize at each school a Parents' Association that is representative of the entire parent population of the school, including underrepresented, hard-to-reach parents. At the request of the Superintendent, the Office of Community Education will be providing training on parent outreach to Springfield's "Parents-Talking-to-Parents Committee." The request from Springfield came as a direct result of the dissemination of the Department's booklet, **Focus on Parents**. The Springfield process models a strategy cataloged in this booklet that uses already active parents to reach out to other parents.

4. Opportunity Schools pilot project (Spring 1990-June 1991).

Many Opportunity School assessments and improvement plans identify the need to strengthen and broaden parent involvement as part of their strategy to raise student achievement. The Central

Massachusetts Regional Education Center, with the assistance from the Office of Community Education will be helping two Opportunity Schools -- the Warren Elementary School in Warren and the Memorial Middle School in Fitchburg -- to develop comprehensive, multi-year, schoolwide parent outreach and involvement initiatives as key pieces of their overall improvement plans. These initiatives will pilot and adapt program prototypes described in **Focus on Parents** that are relevant to the situation in their communities.

E. Infusion of New Approaches to Parent Involvement through Collaboration with other DOE Programs (Spring 1989 - Ongoing)

"Infusion" of new approaches into Department programs that have parent involvement initiatives is the final, and most lasting, pay-off of the information gathering, capacity building, and model development work that has been described above. Through infusion, new approaches that have the potential of involving hard-to-reach parents and generating academic achievement benefits to all children can become the new "business-as-usual" for schools that participate in grant programs and the Department's units in their technical assistance provision.

Since January, 1989, we have taken the following steps toward infusion.

1. Planning meetings with other Department of Education units (Spring 1989 - Ongoing)

Planning meetings have been held with: all Bureau Directors within the Division of School Programs, the Division of Special Education, the Office of Educational Equity, the Equal Education Improvement Program; and the Parent Involvement Team at the Central Massachusetts Regional Education Center. Meetings are being scheduled with Directors from the Northeast, Southeast, and Western Massachusetts Regional Centers, as well as with other Divisions and Bureau's in the Department's Central Office.

2. Collaboration with the Division of Special Education (1989)

The Office of Community Education served as a consultant to the Special Education Parent Advisory Council (PAC) Institute meetings and reviewed successive drafts of PAC guidelines. The focus of this consultation was on sharing strategies that promote inclusive and representative PAC structures and practices.

3. Collaboration with the Office of Educational Equity (1989 - Ongoing)

The Office of Community Education has been involved in several collaborative efforts to strengthen the capacity and maximize the potential of Chapter 636, Section 8 funded Parent Information Centers. Activity has included:

- a. Revising Parent Information Center grant application guidelines to promote an expanded role for Parent Information Centers as the focal point of systemwide parent outreach efforts. (October 1989)

- b. Serving as a resource at the first two meetings of a new Statewide Network of Chapter 636 funded Parent Information Centers. The purposes of this Network are to promote experience and knowledge transfer among the Centers and to develop capacity that will enable Centers to take a lead role in expanding the involvement of traditionally underrepresented parents in the education of their children. (December 1989 and April 1990)

4. Collaboration with the Boston/Chelsea Team

The Office of Community Education, with Chapter 1 and Adult Basic Education units, serves as a resource to the Boston Team on its "Parent Involvement and Education Initiative," one of five priority goals developed jointly by the Department of Education and the Boston School Department. As part of this involvement, the Office of Community Education prepared the "School/Community Parent Outreach" prototype in the Catalog of pre-approved Chapter 636 funded program prototypes for the Boston Public Schools in school year 1990-91.

5. Collaboration with the Bureau of Education of Linguistic Minority Students

The earlier described pilot projects in Lowell and Holyoke have demonstrated the potential of school and minority community-based organization partnerships for including language minority parents more fully in their children's education and, ultimately, in the life of the children's schools. Discussions are underway with the Bureau's Director and staff on ways of strengthening services for language minority children and their families through partnerships with language minority community-based organizations.

III. NEXT STEPS

The Department's most recent emphasis on parent outreach has broken new ground. New models have been developed. New issues have been identified and given a priority status. Moreover, the soil is fertile for further growth and development. Local school and community leaders share the sense of urgency that new approaches to parent involvement must be refined and implemented in order to break the intergenerational cycle of school failure and address the Board's priority of providing an effective education to our academically at-risk children. In order to take advantage of this sense of urgency, we will continue to work on two fronts: internally, to infuse new approaches to parent involvement in Department of Education programs; externally, to increase professional and public support for and appreciation of the important role of parents in education.

Internally, our next new initiative will be to work more closely with Chapter 1. Recognizing that current Federal policies and resources make "parents' involvement as supporters of their children's learning" a major

program priority, we will explore ways in which new outreach strategies can be implemented within Chapter 1. Specifically we will collaborate with the Department's Chapter 1 Director and:

- Convene a group of Chapter 1 directors, teachers and parents to review the parent involvement materials developed by the Department; ask the group to highlight strategies that would be particularly relevant to Chapter 1 parents.
- Work with a regional center team to select several school districts in which Chapter 1 pilot programs can be implemented and field tested.

We will also work to develop linkages among Chapter 1, Adult Basic Education, and Chapter 188 Early Childhood programs in order to model family literacy programs and other intergenerational approaches that have the potential to strengthen families' ability to become involved in their children's education.

Externally, we will continue to collaborate with the MPTSA and the three principals' associations and will expand the coalition to include the MASS, MASC, and MTA and MFT. With MASS and MASC, we will be exploring the development of systemwide comprehensive policies and support systems that can make each school more "parent friendly." With the teachers' groups, we will begin collaborating on the development of how-to materials and inservice training that can better enable teachers to make use of the essential educational resource that is represented by parent involvement. A real working partnership between parents and teachers, both of whom share aspirations for children, can be the most powerful force for educational improvement.