

Parents as Partners

Findings and Recommendations

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About CTAC

The Community Training and Assistance Center (CTAC) is a national not-for-profit organization with a twenty-six year track record of demonstrated success in urban communities. It focuses on developing leadership, planning and managerial expertise within community-based organizations, school systems, collaborative partnerships, state and municipal governments, and health and human service agencies. Since 1979, CTAC has provided assistance to hundreds of school districts, community-based organizations, coalitions and public institutions in the United States and several other countries.

CTAC's staff is comprised of nationally recognized executives, educators, policy makers and organizers who have extensive experience working with city, county and state agencies, educational institutions, federal legislative bodies, not-for-profit organizations, philanthropic institutions and the private sector.

The presentations, findings and analysis in this report are those of the Community Training and Assistance Center.

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I. Introduction

The goal of the Parents as Partners Project is to build the capacity of the Seattle Public Schools to engage parents in the educational process, meeting the requirements of the federal No Child Left Behind Act. Launched in January 2005, the project is a collaboration of the Seattle Public Schools (SPS) and the Community Training and Assistance Center (CTAC), and is made possible with the support of the U.S. Department of Education, Fund for the Improvement of Education.

The Parents as Partners Project focuses particularly on underserved populations: non-native English speaking parents, low income parents and families, and ethnic minority parent populations. It builds on the knowledge, expertise and infrastructure pioneered by SPS through the Family Support Worker Program and Family Partnership Project. It also complements the SPS's new School-Family Partnership Policy and recent district efforts to communicate effectively with an increasingly diverse student and family population.

The project is comprised of three major components:

- **Phase I** included the conceptual design of the project and the approval of district leadership. A formal proposal was developed, congressional support obtained and grant funds secured. January – December 2004.
- **Phase II** involved interviews and surveying of parents, community leaders, teachers and school administrators. The findings summarized in this report were presented to the Seattle Public Schools leadership team. February – June 2005.
- **Phase III**, informed by the findings of Phase II, involves the training of front-line school staff and parent leaders, and the development of related training materials. Approximately 100 school staff and parent leaders will be trained to inform, engage and involve parents as partners in No Child Left Behind implementation, school improvement efforts and student learning. These newly trained leaders will conduct meetings and events with parents in schools throughout the district, reaching an additional 400 or more parents. The first two trainings will be led by CTAC, and subsequent trainings by SPS. CTAC will monitor two of the SPS trainings and provide feedback. June-December 2005.

This report presents the findings of the data gathering and analysis (Phase II) and is intended to guide the design of related staff and parent training. The findings and recommendations also provide useful insights for informing the district's broader parent involvement strategies.

II. Background

A. NCLB and Parent Involvement

Spurred by growing frustration at the lack of progress in the nation's underperforming schools, and backed by bipartisan support in Congress, the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB) set high standards for student achievement for all schools and all children. This national law now holds educational systems accountable to achieve those standards. With continued support from Congress, NCLB remains in effect, with only minor modifications since its passage in early 2002.

Although NCLB's broad goals are generally consistent with the educational objectives of most local school districts, NCLB is often viewed in terms of its requirements regarding student testing. Less well-known are a series of parental involvement provisions written into the law that require information to be provided to parents and that designate specific parental rights. These provisions provide a basis for parents to become actively involved in the education of their children. These include, for example:

- Schools must produce and distribute individual student test results that allow parents to understand the specific academic needs of their children.
- Districts must make school and district report cards available to parents with disaggregated test scores, teacher qualifications and other information related to school performance.
- In the event of a school's low performance and lack of progress, the district must notify and explain to parents how they can become involved in school-improvement efforts. Parents also have options to ensure that their children receive high-quality education by receiving supplemental educational services or by transferring to higher-performing schools.
- Districts must annually notify parents of students in Title I schools of their right to know about teacher qualifications.
- Districts and schools receiving Title I funds must ensure parent involvement in overall planning at the district and school levels; annual meetings; training; coordinating parent involvement strategies; and evaluating those strategies and revising them when needed.
- Districts must ensure that all teachers hired to teach core academic subjects in Title I programs are highly qualified. By the end of the 2005-2006 school year, all teachers of core academic subjects must be highly qualified. A "highly qualified teacher" is one with full certification, a bachelor's degree and demonstrated competence in subject knowledge and teaching.
- States are required to establish uniform management and reporting systems to collect information on school safety and drug use among students. This information is to be publicly reported so that parents, school officials and others can assess the problems and work toward finding solutions. Parents of children who have been victims of a violent crime at a school, or who attend "persistently dangerous schools" will be offered school choice.
- With recent changes in NCLB, schools may be eligible to use alternative assessment tools for measuring the yearly progress of students with disabilities, specifically geared toward their abilities. This creates an opportunity for parents to work with their children, teachers, and district leadership to implement this new provision.

The parent involvement provisions were written into NCLB with the research-based knowledge that parent involvement is directly related to student achievement. Schools and parents each bring different yet critical pieces of information to the table regarding children's

needs and strengths, barriers to learning, and resources upon which to build. In finding solutions, and in working together to affirm student progress and build a cycle of success, both family members and schools have critical roles to play. Numerous research studies and the national track record in reform confirm the same finding – collaboration among parents and schools positively correlates with improved student achievement. Parent involvement produces positive results despite differences in socio-economic level, ethnic/racial background, and educational attainment of parents.

NCLB provides an opportunity for school districts to promote a common purpose for parent involvement, and to create tools and mechanisms for positive parent involvement in educational improvements. Parents with information about student achievement and who are knowledgeable of their parental rights are better prepared to become engaged in the education of their own child as well as in school and district improvements.

B. Seattle Public Schools and Parent Involvement

In the State of Washington, Seattle is the largest urban school district. With nearly 47,000 students, Seattle Public Schools demonstrates solid academic performance in comparison to its urban peers nationally, and has shown improvements in standardized test scores (WASL) in recent years. Nonetheless, the district faces challenges – not only the challenges faced by most other large, urban districts, but also challenges related to its unique and rapidly changing demographics. In the last ten years, a large influx of refugees and immigrants into Seattle has occurred at the same time that a shortage of affordable housing and other factors have impacted total enrollment of the district. The race/ethnic distribution of students enrolled in the district currently includes White, 40.9%; Asian, 23.1%; African American, 22.5%; Latino, 11.1%; and Native American, 2.4%. Just over 4,000 students, or 8.6%, are bilingual, with families speaking 90+ different languages. Thirty-nine percent of students receive free and reduced lunch. Despite the district's overall successes, student achievement data indicate a significant achievement gap.

Seattle Public Schools, like other districts nationally, has set its sights on closing the achievement gap. The district recognizes that this requires parent involvement and that parents are a critical link in the chain of student success. Since 1988, Seattle's Family Support Worker Program has linked elementary school children and their families with community resources, and has involved families in their children's education. Since 2002, the district's Family Partnerships Project has assisted 30 schools to integrate and institutionalize best practices of family involvement into their academic and building goals, with integrated family engagement plans. Parent-teacher associations, partnerships with community-based organizations, and many other efforts at individual schools and within the district, demonstrate the district's commitment to work at parent involvement. In 2004, the Board of Directors for the Seattle Public Schools passed a districtwide policy, the School-Family Partnership Policy. Likewise the voters of Seattle have agreed to the importance of family and community partnership for education, repeatedly passing the City's Families and Education Levy.

C. Parents as Partners Project

In the context of No Child Left Behind's goals and requirements, the Parents as Partners Project seeks to inform, engage and involve parents and families as partners in school improvement efforts and student learning throughout Seattle Public Schools. The project builds on the foundation set in place by the district.

The project was designed in recognition of the parent involvement challenges that Seattle Public Schools is currently confronted with:

- Meeting the requirements of NCLB;
- Integrating NCLB requirements into existing parent communication and involvement efforts;
- Implementing both NCLB parent requirements and the district's broader parent involvement efforts, such that parent involvement helps the district to meet NCLB and district achievement goals; and
- Building a broad based district and parent partnership on behalf of student achievement.

III. Data Gathering Process

A major component of the Parents as Partners Project involves the examination of needs and perceptions related to No Child Left Behind parent involvement implementation. With the cooperation and assistance of SPS, CTAC collected input, confidentially, from parents, community leaders, teachers, and district administrators during the district's 2005 spring semester. The major findings of this examination are presented within this report.

A. Interviews and Focus Groups

CTAC held interviews and focus groups involving 25 parents, 11 community leaders (such as staff of community-based groups involved with education), 7 school staff, 7 SPS administrators, and 2 school board members. The purpose of these meetings was to explore the context for the project and to shape the survey questionnaire that would later be circulated among a greater number of people. The interviews helped to identify the salient educational priorities and concerns, perceptions about parent involvement, and understandings about No Child Left Behind.

B. Staff Surveys

CTAC designed and distributed a survey for school staff in order to gather information from a wider set of parents, community leaders and district staff. The content of the survey was guided by the interviews and focus groups.

The survey included forty questions grouped into four categories: Parent-School Communications, Instruction and Assessment, Awareness of NCLB, and School/District Improvement and NCLB. A copy of the survey is included in the appendix.

SPS cooperated in the distribution and collection of surveys. Approximately 1000 surveys were distributed to certified staff members of 26 schools, representing approximately twenty-five percent of schools in the district. A representative sample of schools was selected to participate based on level (elementary, middle, high, and alternative schools), location, and demographic diversity. Surveys were distributed to staff at staff meetings and/or through internal mail systems at each school. A total of 522 surveys were returned.

C. Parent Surveys

CTAC also designed a survey for parents, with content guided by the interview and focus group process. The parent survey had 29 questions organized in categories similar to the staff survey. The survey was translated into eight languages, identified by the district as the languages that most commonly require translation for school parents: Amharic, Cambodian, Chinese, Lao, Somali, Spanish, Tigrinha, and Vietnamese. A copy of the survey is provided in the appendix.

More than 3000 surveys were distributed through PTAs, Family Support Workers, Family Partnership Project staff, and 24 community-based organizations. In most cases, surveys were handed to parents at meetings, or in one-on-one encounters, and collected immediately. A total of 695 surveys were returned.

D. Compilation and Analysis of Data

CTAC compiled the data and information from the interview and focus group sessions, and the parent and staff surveys. With the surveys, CTAC was able to capture input from a large number of stakeholders. With the interviews and focus groups, CTAC was able to gather more in-depth perceptions and observations. The surveys and interviews could then be compared and contrasted, for a balanced understanding of the issues that were probed.

It should be noted that in the survey analysis, responses were studied as totals, and also by category and grouping. Staff responses were examined according to level: elementary, middle, high, and other (K-8, K-12 and alternative) schools. They were also examined by position: teacher, principal, other instructional and non-instructional staff, administrator, and other. Parent surveys were reviewed by title (parents, and community representatives), by race/ethnicity and by language.

Where this report refers to percentages of survey responses, it indicates the total response rate and/or the response rates for categories or groupings. Given the limited number of responses for some categories or groupings, some of the disaggregated results are presented for the readers' information, but can not be reported with any statistical significance. This is the case with categories such as community representatives (23 responses), principals (7 responses) and administrators (10 responses).

For the parent survey, respondents were asked to select race/ethnicity from the list: Native American, African-American, Asian, Latino, White and Other. In summarizing important results from the parent surveys, CTAC grouped together Native American, African-American, Asian and Latino respondents into the category "Non-White." This was done in order to generate results that would be statistically significant. Likewise, parents responding to the survey in a language other than English are grouped as "Non-English" for statistical purposes.

The numbers of responses by category are provided in the Appendix.

IV. Findings

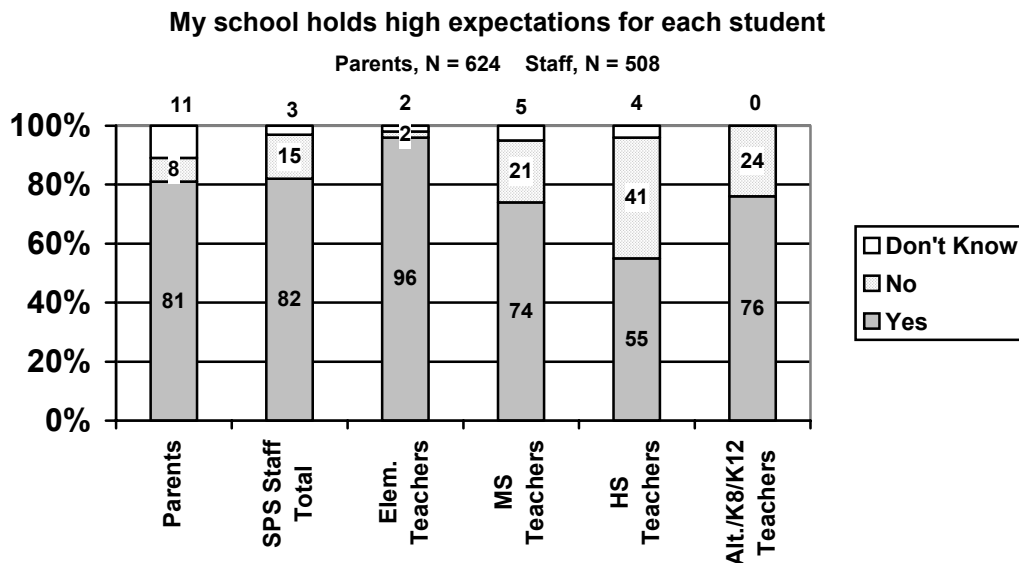
The findings are informed by more than 1200 parent and SPS staff surveys, and qualitative input from 52 individuals through interviews. The findings provide an indication of the strengths and also the needs or gaps in parent involvement in the Seattle Public Schools in the context of NCLB and the district's student achievement goals.

A. Student Achievement

Student achievement is the bottom line for education. It represents the extent to which students learn and are able to demonstrate or apply what they have learned. The goal of improving student achievement provides a common ground for schools and parents; both want students to achieve. It provides a basis for communication between parents and schools, and for partnerships with parents. Therefore, to set the stage for this initiative, it is important to establish the specific student achievement concerns and interests of parents, teachers and administrators. It is essential to understand where they intersect, and where they differ.

Overall achievement. Many of those interviewed by CTAC are pleased with student achievement in the Seattle Public Schools overall. Several noted that the schools are doing well when compared to others nationally, and that achievement test scores are going up. Some interviewees are pleased with the accomplishments of literacy programs, and like the reading and tutoring programs. However, in both the interview and survey process, concerns are also identified. Progress, many note, is inconsistent by school, by area of town, by race/ethnicity, etc.

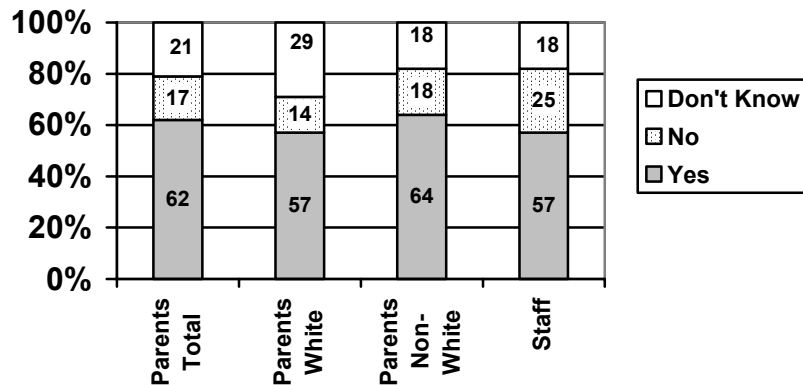
High expectations for students. One important factor for achievement is high expectations. A significant number of district staff and parents surveyed are not confident that all students are held to high expectations by their schools. Further, by grade level, this finding varies significantly.



Achievement gap. In CTAC's interviews with district staff and community members, nearly all mentioned the achievement gap when asked about their concerns about student achievement. They expressed a frustration with the pace of improvements as reflected in the data and their personal experiences with individual students. Following are some of the common concerns raised:

- There is not full participation of staff in professional development opportunities, and there is inconsistent usage of best-practices in classrooms and across the district. One staff member commented, "The district provides a lot of programs and professional development . . . [however] programs are not delivered to all teachers, so they don't reach all kids." Another questioned, "Teachers have gotten so much professional development . . . but the question is, are they implementing it in their classrooms?"
- Some district staff feel overwhelmed by factors of poverty, special education needs, language issues, and lack of resources that they feel impact efforts to address the achievement gap. Others identify institutional barriers that need to be addressed.
- Parents are concerned that some students get passed on from grade to grade without having made adequate progress.
- A significant portion of staff and parents are not confident that all students, including those with special needs, are treated equitably in the SPS.

**All students are treated fairly and equitably in SPS,
including those with special needs**
Parents, N=573 Staff, N=501



Support for classrooms and students needing extra help. Ninety percent (90%) of district staff and 75% of parents agree that extra assistance from the school is available when students need academic help. Yet, only 41% of staff believe that the educational options and support services available for students who are experiencing difficulty are of high quality.

Student achievement is also impacted by student access to current, high quality textbooks and a school library. Seventy-four percent (75%) of staff and 72% of parents that responded to the survey feel that students have the availability of these resources. Middle and high school level staff are less likely to respond "yes" to this question than their elementary school counterparts.

Further, only 30% of teachers respond "yes" to the statement, "The district supports services to classrooms for identified needs," while 45% say "no" and 25% reply "don't know."

Other concerns about student achievement identified in interviews include:

- Staff are concerned about math achievement levels.
- Approximately 13% of staff believe that parent volunteers do not contribute to the effectiveness of schools, and another 11% “don’t know” if they do or not.
- Some parents and community leaders are very concerned about special education, ELL placement and the IEP process; the way these programs serve children and parents; and the results of these programs.
- Parents mention overcrowded classrooms.
- Parents feel that there is a need for teacher accountability; some state that teachers need to be paid more.
- Parents and community leaders are frustrated that access to the best education at “good” schools, magnet programs and/or academy programs is limited.
- Both parents and staff are concerned about the impact of high stakes testing on dropout rates.
- Parents and staff are pleased with emphasis on reading/writing and math, but are concerned about constraints, such as lack of time and funding, for other programs that also boost student achievement (social studies, art, music, etc.).

Priorities for improving student achievement. In recommending areas where the district should place more focus, school staff, parents and community leaders share some opinions and differ on others:

- School administrators are especially focused on standards-based curriculum, professional development and transformation plans.
- Parents are interested in a more individualized approach; they want to see schools address the individual needs and strengths of their children.
- Parents (and some teachers) would like to see children receive more “holistic” teaching and programming – social skills, character building, thinking skills, sports, art and music. As one parent said, “The role of schools is to promote the progress of the whole family and the child, and make our children be contributing members of the community.”
- Staff, parents and community leaders mention the need for more emphasis on hiring minority and bilingual teaching staff.
- Community leaders and SPS staff mention the need for more/better early childhood education.

In summary, parents, community leaders, teachers and school administrators share a common concern for the achievement gap and efforts that produce more even/equitable student achievement across geographic and demographic lines. However, there are differences of opinion about the obstacles that affect the gap, and areas where they would like to see more emphasis or attention in order to achieve better results.

B. Performance Data

Understanding performance data and its implications is critical for any effort at school or district improvement. Understanding student achievement – student-by-student, classroom-by-classroom, teacher-by-teacher, and school-by-school – is critically important for identifying pockets of success upon which to build, and specific areas of need that demand attention or need targeted resources. For teachers and administrators, performance data also serve to build an objective case for continuing with programs and services that are working, for changing what is not, and for building a common ground for collaboration.

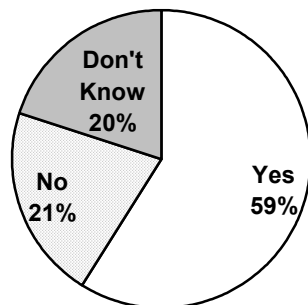
Access to data, and an understanding of the data, is equally important for parents and community leaders. Knowledge gained from data can be useful in supporting individual students, helping out in the classroom, participating in schoolwide improvements and decision-making, and engaging in districtwide improvements.

With student achievement as the common goal of schools and parents, data about student achievement provide the tangible material, the substance, for school staff and parents to have informed dialogue and to make informed decisions for individual students, schools and the district. Given the importance of educational data for parent involvement, data was included as a topic for consideration in the interviews and surveys.

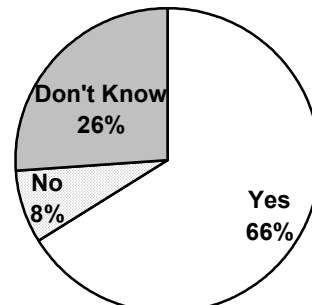
Impact of WASL. The Washington Assessment of Student Learning (WASL) is a major source of data for the Seattle Public Schools. It is also a measure used for compliance with No Child Left Behind. Following are some of the findings from the interviews and surveys related to WASL testing:

- WASL generates a negative image among many people interviewed, both internal and external to the district, who commented that it puts too much pressure on students and teachers, it does not fully capture a student's ability or progress, it consumes school time that could be used for other purposes, it results in a problem some call "teaching to the test," and other concerns.
- Some parents, although concerned about the concept of standardized testing, also note that it is important to measure performance. One parent states, "Standardized tests are important to know that kids are getting educated or not – I don't like them, but I can't see another way."
- One representative of a community-based organization notes, "I think most parents like having a standardized test. There are few who are vocal about not liking it. But in general, parents want to see how their kids are doing and want to see schools improve."
- Parents report that their child's WASL information arrives at home without any explanation or discussion about what it means for the child or how parents should respond. It is noted that some schools do talk about the tests at meetings or workshops.
- The booklet produced at the state level to explain the tests to parents is described by one community leader as, "full of jargon" and a parent notes that test results are "cryptic."
- A significant portion of parents and teachers are not confident that schools are able to explain assessment scores in a way that helps parents understand their child's progress.

Standardized test scores are explained in a way that helps me understand my child's progress
Parents N=627



Teachers and school staff are able to explain assessment scores in a way that helps parents understand their child's progress
Staff N=511



Other performance data and information accessible to parents. Report cards and progress reports are a key source of performance data for parents. There are mixed feelings about report cards and progress reports, with some parents finding them useful, and others finding them confusing or difficult to understand.

Some respondents mention newspaper reports on school data. Others mention an annual SPS publication that presents performance and demographic data by school. Respondents feel that general school data, as presented in the newspaper and the SPS publication, is not very useful and it can even be deceiving. The data can make schools look like they are either successful or failing, without presenting the whole picture of what is occurring at each school.

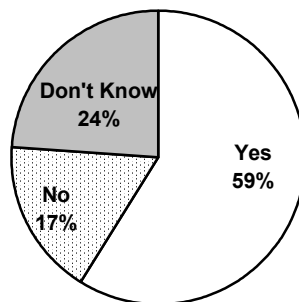
Parent-teacher conferences at the elementary level provide an opportunity for teachers to discuss performance data, such as reading assessments, with parents. Yet, several parents note that WASL results are rarely discussed at such conferences. One administrator comments, "I wish good communication with parents on education data was more systemic."

Parents with limited English proficiency often get school-related information from their children or other parents and in some cases from bilingual contacts at their child's school. Progress reports, report cards, and WASL test results are currently delivered in English for many families with limited English proficiency. One bi-lingual parent notes that even with fairly good English, she finds that, "Some of the vocabulary used in those reports is not very common."

Performance data and information used by school staff and administrators. School staff and administrators interviewed by CTAC mention other sources of data collected at the classroom, school and district levels – ITBS, various reading/writing assessments, attendance data, discipline data and more. Many feel that multiple sources of data about performance are important to guide educational improvements.

Disaggregated data, many interviewees note, provide important insights. Beyond the disaggregation that is required by NCLB, the district is making an effort to disaggregate data even further – disaggregating the demographic category of "Asian," for example, to Chinese, Vietnamese, etc., to improve accuracy. Given the many demographic variables in Seattle, interviewees noted that disaggregation of data to levels that are useful for staff and parents is difficult but necessary. They would like to see such efforts expanded to more data sets.

Available test data needs to be much more specific to be helpful to the teacher and parent
Staff N=493



Administrators and teachers are encouraged by the availability and use of more value-added performance data. While many feel that the use of data among teachers and administrators is on the right path, some feel that more work is needed to make the use of data more systematic. Several administrators and teachers mention the challenge of getting access to classroom-level data, and using such data to improve teaching in the classroom.

Data on the district website. Many district staff members, as well as some community leaders and parents that were interviewed, mention the data and information available on the district website. Community leaders comment that while they can find data on the website, it is difficult to find what you are looking for, and difficult to analyze on your own.

One community leader comments, “There has been training on undoing racism, to empower parents, communities of color to speak up, advocate for themselves. Parents need to take time to get actual facts, see the whole picture. We need to use data for the right reasons, provide greater opportunities for those kids that don’t have the same doors, and parents that don’t have the same voice.”

C. Parent Involvement

Parent involvement, with a proven track record for boosting student achievement in districts nationally, can be an important strategy for bridging the achievement gap and meeting NCLB requirements. Following are findings from the surveys and interviews related to the many dimensions of school-parent partnerships in the Seattle Public Schools.

Consistency of parent involvement. Parent involvement varies significantly from school to school, and within individual schools.

The Family Partnership Project and the Family Support Worker Program are both frequently named for their positive impact on schools and families. Several individual schools, principals and teachers are also praised for their efforts to involve parents in education. Parent-teacher organizations in some schools are noted for their effectiveness. Parent support and peer-learning groups that exist at some schools are mentioned positively as well.

Yet, there is a general perception that there is more parent involvement at northern schools than southern and western schools. There is also a perception that parent involvement is considerably greater at the elementary school level than at middle and high school levels. While socio-economic level of families at schools and the level of schools (elementary versus others) are correlated to parent involvement by many, respondents often cited principals as the key factor for whether a school has good parent involvement or not. Several of those interviewed gave examples of schools that defied what might be expected based on the school’s demographics, with strong parent involvement efforts and results.

Definition for parent involvement. There are different views about the definition of parent involvement and goals for parent involvement – both inside and outside of schools. Some interviewees see the breadth of parent involvement, while others are more focused on one aspect or another. For example, some are very focused on the importance of parents providing support and a learning environment at home. Others stress the importance of school/parent communications, parents being active in schools, and/or participation in school decision-making.

There appear to be differences of opinion regarding the role of mentors versus parents. Some individuals that were interviewed mentioned that there is a movement to identify “a

caring adult” for each child, while others are concerned that this not take the place of parent involvement efforts.

Internal systems for managing parent involvement. Parent involvement efforts are part of the responsibilities of staff at various levels. Parent involvement is also a component of various programs and departments throughout the educational system. Parent involvement efforts, as previously noted, are not implemented consistently across the district. For example, the Family Partnership Program operates in a limited number of schools. The Family Support Worker Program operates in elementary schools. Special education and bilingual/ELL education programs impact some, but not all families.

One school staff member notes, “Efforts at parent involvement are not connected. There needs to be a conglomerate working on this, not just a few.”

Several staff note the lack of a clear directive about parent involvement from district leaders. A concern is voiced that parent involvement is not clearly part of school transformation plans.

Finally, many staff interviewees mention a lack of staff time and resources for parent involvement efforts.

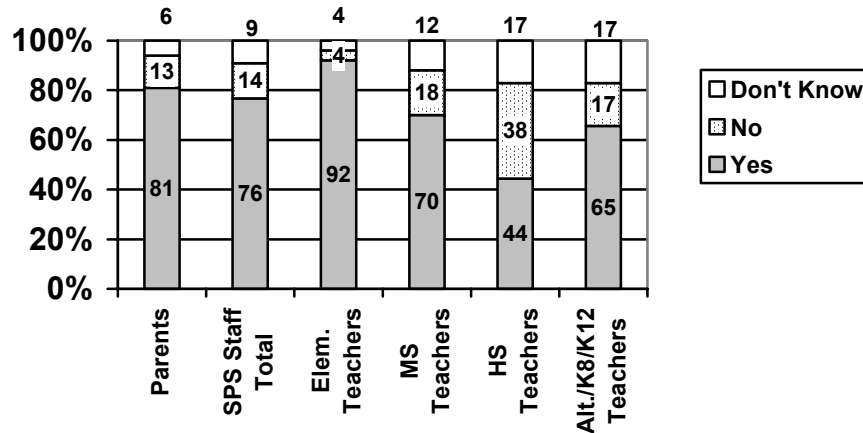
Parent/School communications. There are several positive indicators from the surveys, for example:

- 93% of parents say that they receive helpful information about what their child is learning when visiting the school. 85% of staff agree that such visits are helpful.
- 93% of teachers say that they inform parents about expectations for both students and parents; and 90% of parents agree.

In the interviews and focus groups, parents express a desire for more direct communication with teachers. Parents would like to see more school initiative to establish and maintain communication through phone calls and house visits. Likewise teachers and other school staff would like more parents to contact them, show an interest, ask questions, etc. There are a significant number of parents and district staff that express a desire for more regular parent/teacher communication, and not only when a student is in trouble or having difficulties.

**Staff and parents communicate with each other routinely,
not only when a student is in trouble or having difficulties**

Parents N=630 Staff N=508



The majority of parents and school staff believe it is the responsibility of the school to contact parents when a child is having difficulty. However, there is a sizeable group – 20% of parents and 30% of staff – that are not confident that parents can trust that the school will contact them immediately. Non-English speaking parents are more likely than English-speaking parents to trust that schools will contact them.

Many parents that were interviewed express that they want more and better communication about their child's progress. They would like communication about positive things, not only the problems or challenges the child faces. They want to know earlier, rather than later, about behavior and discipline issues.

Parents want to be aware of learning objectives and what students are working on in school. Parents want to see school work coming home. Some suggest that they would like to see more feedback from teachers on the school work that does come home so that parents know what they can work on with their child. Others suggest that there be postings by telephone or website to tell parents and students what they are working on each week and to notify them of assignments.

Meanwhile, staff are concerned that parent assistance with homework is a challenge for parents with limited educational attainment and/or limited English. Different strategies for dealing with this are being tested by individual teachers and schools.

Welcoming parents in schools. In interviews, many parents and community leaders express concern that schools are not welcoming to all parents. Parents speak of schools being defensive when they arrive or when they start asking questions. While many feel that they personally are welcome in schools and/or are confident to enter schools, they also believe that this is not true for all parents and is not true at all schools.

Among those surveyed, 94% of parents say, "yes," they feel welcome at their child's schools. Ninety-six percent (96%) of staff believe that their school is welcoming to parents. However, parents that identified themselves as "White" agree more often (98%) than parents who identified themselves with another racial or ethnic background (91%). And, elementary

school parents are more likely to say yes (96%) than secondary school parents (85%). Of the community representatives that responded to the survey, 57% feel that parents are welcome in schools. From the interviews, it is noted that while most school-level staff feel that schools are welcoming to parents, district administrators that were interviewed are less confident.

Parent visits to schools. Fifteen percent (15%) of parents are unsure if parents know what to do and where to go when they visit schools. This number rises to almost 30% for school staff. Also, it is mentioned in several interview/focus groups of parents that the location of schools and accessibility to public transportation can make it difficult for some parents to even go to schools.

Almost 90% of parents agree that school orientation programs are helpful, and 88% believe that parent-teacher conferences contribute to student progress. While parents generally seem to think parent-teacher conferences are helpful, some express in the interviews that there is too much one-way (teacher to parent) communication and that too often conferences are the only contact that parents have with teachers.

When asked if parents are able to talk to a person in-charge in the Seattle Public Schools when they have questions or concerns, 11% of parents respond “no” and another 16% “don’t know.”

School decision-making. Approximately 70% of parents and 77% of staff respond “yes” when asked if parents are included in discussions about school improvements. However, among parents, the response rate varies by race/ethnicity: 79% of parents that identify themselves as “White” answer yes to this question while 65% of parents that identify themselves with a category other than “White” answer yes to the same question.

In the interviews with administrators and representatives of community organizations, most agree that, although there have been some improvements, there is still not enough involvement of parents in decision-making at the school and district level. The interviews and focus group sessions also indicate that parents are generally unaware of parent involvement in leadership and decision-making at schools and at the district level, beyond parent-teacher organizations. Further, there are not active parent-teacher organizations at all schools.

Cultural competency. While many feel that the district is making progress with cultural competency, many also express that the district’s work in this area is not complete. They feel that not all staff are culturally competent – some staff have participated in training while others have not. Cultural competency also needs to become further embedded in educational activities and woven into academic curriculum rather than added on as an extra. Many feel that more emphasis and effort is needed in hiring and retaining an ethnically, culturally, and linguistically diverse teaching staff, in addition to pursuing more training.

Languages and translation. With the many languages spoken in the homes of Seattle Public School students, many of the individuals interviewed mention the impact of language barriers on parent involvement. Among the respondents of non-English surveys 87% agree that the district is making an effort to communicate with parents in their native language. Eighty-eight percent (88%) of the non-English respondents also agree that translators are available for parents visiting the schools or for parent-teacher conferences. Still, parents, community leaders and staff that were interviewed are concerned that more translation is needed, more often and in more languages.

Several SPS staff members that were interviewed note that translation services need to be handled more efficiently. Specifically, they suggest that more translation be completed at the district level when students across the district can benefit, and that translation services also be available at the school level when the translation need is school-specific.

Additionally, it is mentioned that staff need to become more accustomed to working with parents through translators at parent-teacher conferences, in phone calls to parents, and in other encounters.

The use of bilingual children as transmitters of information to parents or translators concerns some individuals that were interviewed. They are concerned that it can be too great of a responsibility for the children, and can result in miscommunications.

Community organizations. Many SPS administrators, teachers and parents that were interviewed identified the importance of community organizations in reaching and involving parents in education. These organizations are located in neighborhoods where low income and immigrant families live, and/or have relationships with families through the programs and services that they offer. Many of these organizations do outreach and community organizing.

- Several community organizations mention positive working relationships, and/or regular communication with the SPS Family Partnership Program, the Family Support Workers Program, and/or individual schools.
- Many of the community representatives interviewed recognize the efforts that the district is making to involve parents and address the achievement gap, but they all noted the inconsistency of results, and all believe more can be done. One states, “The new parent policy is headed in the right direction, but now implementation is important, such as with effective parent involvement on building leadership teams.”
- Community representatives would like to see parent involvement efforts not just reach parents, but connect with parents: by providing a physical space in schools where parents can go, be comfortable, and know that they are valued; by having school staff from the front desk to the classrooms that listen to parents and offering more forums with two-way dialogue; by proactively connecting with parents in places other than schools (TV and radio talk shows, in neighborhood centers and churches, etc.); and by involving parents in academics, “not just events,” as one representative states. Community organizations can help schools bridge these connections.
- Several representatives that were interviewed comment that the district has requested their input (and/or the input of their constituency) previously, however there has been little or no feedback in return from the district.
- The survey responses from individuals that identify themselves as “community representatives” indicate that they are very concerned about parent involvement in education. For example, only 57% believe that schools are welcoming to parents, and 50% believe that school staff communicates with parents regularly. Likewise, only 41% believe that parents are able to talk to a person in-charge in the SPS when they have questions or concerns.

D. No Child Left Behind

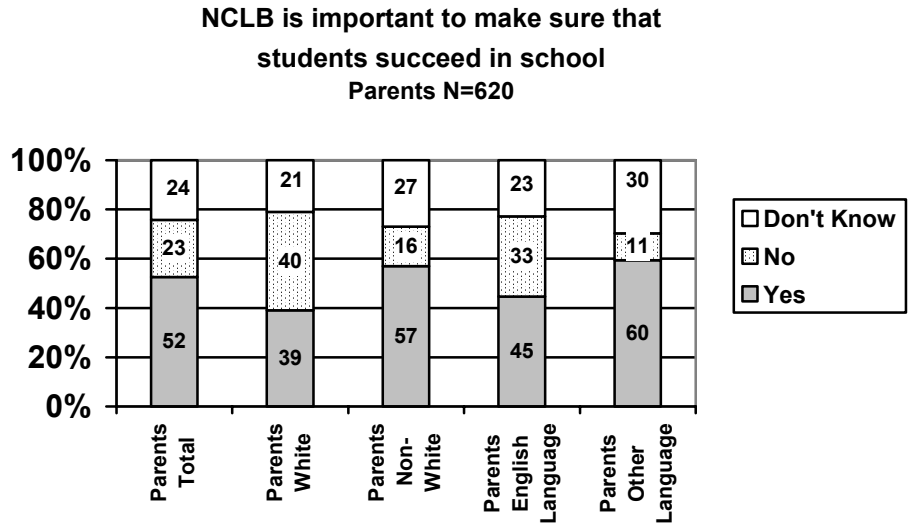
Through the interviews and surveys of parents, school staff and community leaders, CTAC examined the extent to which respondents are aware of NCLB requirements, and particularly the parent involvement aspects of it. CTAC also probed their awareness of the implementation of those requirements, and their observations regarding the impact of NCLB on student achievement goals.

General awareness of NCLB parent involvement components. Within the Seattle Public Schools, survey and interview results are consistent with national findings: few parents, community leaders or school staff are well informed about the parental involvement requirements of NCLB.

Image of NCLB. NCLB, in general, has a negative image among those interviewed. Many of those interviewed that had some level of familiarity with NCLB associate NCLB with stressful testing and reporting requirements placed on schools, and a lack of funding for implementation. Many note that, while they like the idea of NCLB (the basic premise), they are not in favor of the Act itself.

When the interviewees were asked what, specifically, they know about the NCLB, few are able to name specific provisions, or any details. Some hope it will simply go away. Yet, NCLB is present in the education reform landscape, and there are no indications that it will be significantly changed any time soon. The image of NCLB, both internal and external to the district, presents a significant challenge for involvement of parents and staff, and consequently the successful implementation of NCLB.

Among parents, 55% agree that NCLB is important for student achievement. However, a greater percentage of parents that identified themselves with a race/ethnicity other than white, and/or that completed a survey in a language other than English, are more likely to agree that it is important.



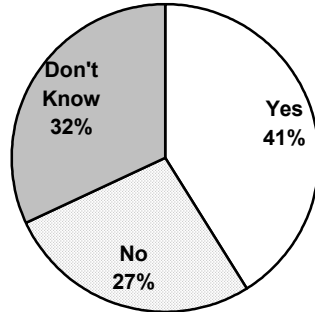
Among staff, approximately 71% of principals and 71% of administrators respond “yes” to the statement, “NCLB contributes to improved achievement at my school;” whereas twelve percent of teachers respond “yes” to the same statement.

Distribution of NCLB general information. The findings vary with respect to the extent of communication of information about NCLB to parents. While several district administrators feel that there has been extensive NCLB information communicated to staff and parents, many other staff believe that there has been little or no communication about NCLB. Several community leaders and school staff members note that those families that are likely to be

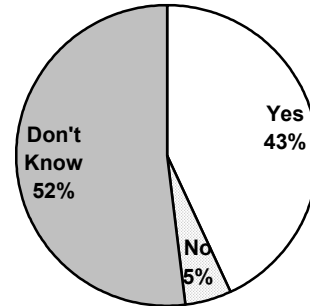
most impacted by NCLB (English language learners, students having the most difficulty in school, etc.), are also the least likely to be familiar with it.

Thirty-nine percent (41%) of parents say that their school helps parents understand NCLB. Forty-three percent (43%) of staff indicate that their school has communicated the provisions of NCLB to parents.

My school helps parents understand NCLB
Parents N=625



My school has communicated the provisions of NCLB to parents
Staff N=506



Sixty-nine percent (69%) of school staff do not know if the district or school has published a phone number or other source where staff, parents, or community members can access information about NCLB.

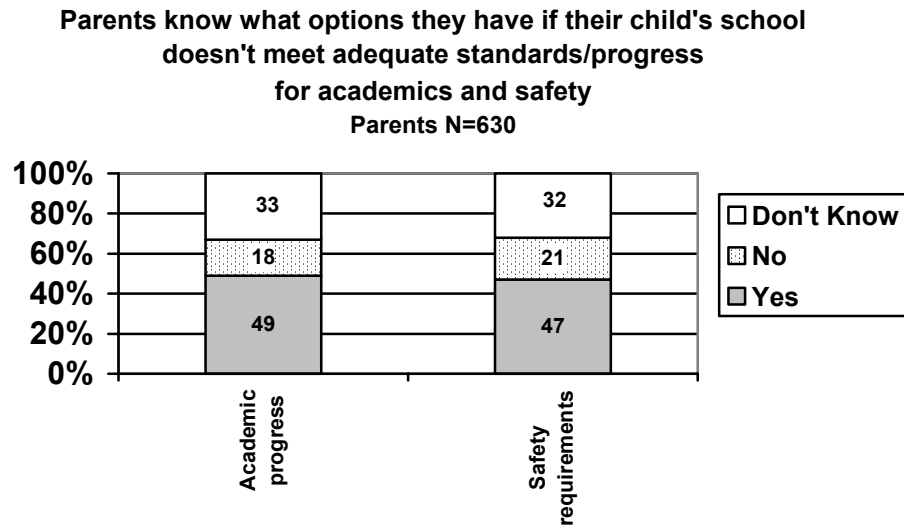
Distribution of NCLB data, assistance in understanding it. Among the unprecedented aspects of NCLB is the requirement placed on school districts to provide parents with significant amounts of data on student and school performance. Yet there are many parents and teachers who believe that parents are not getting student and school achievement data or they are unsure if it is being delivered in a format that is useful. See findings in Section IVB regarding performance data.

Information about teacher qualifications. For schools that receive Title I support, the district is required to inform parents about teacher qualifications. By the 2005-6 school year, teacher qualification requirements extend to all schools. This provision of NCLB lets parents know that they have a right to find out about the qualifications of teachers at their child's school and consequently the ability to make decisions based on that information. Among those surveyed, 55% of parents and 59% of staff say they are not aware that parents receive this information.

Among district staff that responded to the survey, 25% agree that "teachers understand about and are provided support in meeting the highly-qualified teacher provisions of NCLB." Another 46% "don't know" and 29% respond "no."

Parental rights and options to act under NCLB. Parents also are given unprecedented options to act when schools are underperforming or unsafe. When parents that were interviewed said, "yes" that they were aware of some of these NCLB provisions, they quickly mention that they do not want their children to switch schools. They want schools to improve. As such, these requirements can open the door for schools and parents to work together to make improvements, before such drastic steps are required. Yet, not all parents

are aware of their rights and options. Likewise, the majority of teachers and other school staff are unsure if the district or their school has informed parents of this aspect of NCLB.



When a school does not meet the NCLB required average yearly progress (AYP) for two consecutive years, a letter is sent home to parents, informing them of their right to select another school. Several interviewees described the letter as “unintelligible” and written in “legalese,” difficult for not only English language learners, but for most parents.

Distribution of information about NCLB implementation. For parents to be partners in NCLB implementation, they need information describing how the district is implementing NCLB so that they can respond appropriately. While 86% of principals respond “yes,” that written information about implementation is distributed, only 44% of parents and 35% of staff say “yes” to the same question.

Likewise the results to date of NCLB in Seattle are not well known. Almost 44% of parents “don’t know” if student achievement has improved because of NCLB, while 22% say “no” and 34% respond “yes.”

V. Recommendations

The Community Training and Assistance Center recommends the following based on the findings of the data collected.

A. Establish a clear purpose and define district expectations for parent involvement.

“There needs to be a cultural change in schools. It needs to be understood that parents are part of the student’s education and part of the schools.”

– *A concerned parent*

“[Parent involvement] needs to become part of the institution in terms of core values . . . a concerted effort. It needs to come from top administrators.”

– *A contributing staff member*

It is critically important that there be a common purpose and clear definition for parent involvement to unify and focus education improvement efforts for the greatest results. The purpose should be aligned with the priority that the district and parents share: increasing student achievement for all students.

The School-Family Partnership Policy refers to the connection between involvement and student achievement and it provides a definition for such partnerships. However, the policy must be consistently reinforced by district practice. The district also needs to clarify the definition of parent involvement, effectively communicate the definition, provide training, and ensure the consistent use of the term. Clarity should be provided regarding the range of parent involvement that district staff are expected to promote and support, ranging from involvement in education in the home to involvement in school decision-making. High expectations need to be set for effective school/parent partnerships.

The district, and each of its schools, can not be allowed to become complacent about parent involvement or be content with the status quo. It is not enough to have the standard menu of parent involvement at a school (such as school orientations, parent-teacher conferences, a PTA, parent volunteers, and a few parents involved in transformation planning, etc.) available only to the parents that are aware of such opportunities and that feel welcomed in the school. Driven by a purpose of student achievement, parent involvement efforts at the district, school and classroom level must become much more proactive. Efforts must be made to engage *all* parents.

With a clear understanding about student achievement as the purpose of parent involvement, schools and parents will have a stronger platform for sharing information, listening to one another and developing and implementing strategies as a team.

B. Build capacity for the use of performance data as a foundation for parent involvement.

With student achievement as the clearly stated purpose, performance data should provide an objective basis for communication, forming strategies and making decisions by the district and parents working together as a team. Building this capacity is also essential for meeting requirements of No Child Left Behind.

Based on the findings, CTAC recommends that district leadership and administrators be held accountable for achieving consistency among and within schools regarding the

implementation of academic standards, the implementation and analysis of assessments, and communication with parents about standards and assessments. It is recommended that SPS expand its capacity to collect and organize performance and teacher data according to the requirements of NCLB, and to analyze the data effectively so that it can be used by administrators, teachers and parents as a tool for improvement.

The district should focus particular attention on strengthening its capacity to craft and present data-informed messages to parents. The district should also establish mechanisms for feedback and evaluation of these communications. It is also important for the district to build its capacity to engage parents in effective partnership and two-way communication that uses performance data in support of student learning. Further, the district will need to develop and support these partnerships at the classroom, school and district levels.

Finally, it is recommended that steps be taken to improve parent capacity to access, understand and use data to become informed and involved in education solutions for each child, each school and the district.

C. Establish clear roles and accountability for parent involvement for central administrators, principals and school staff.

Given its importance for student achievement, parent involvement needs to become an *integral part* of the delivery of education, not assigned to a limited number of staff, or restricted to specific programs.

School principals were specifically mentioned by those interviewed (parents, community leaders and district staff), as a critical factor for parent involvement and NCLB implementation. It is important that all principals have a clear assignment for promoting and supporting parent involvement. They must set the tone for the parents of the school as well as for other school staff.

Principals should be held accountable for achieving a high level of parent involvement in all steps of the school improvement planning process. Further, this function should be a requisite element of each principal's evaluation. For the principals to be successful, though, they will need customized support from the district. The central administrators responsible for providing this support should be clearly identified, report regularly to district leadership on the progress in involving parents, and be held accountable for the outcomes.

Likewise teachers were mentioned, repeatedly, as being in a critical position for involving parents. Teachers are the direct link to students and student learning, and the natural partner for parents whose goal is also student achievement. Parents often have a familiarity with their children's teachers, some level of communication with teachers, and often a high level of respect for teachers. Parents want more communication with teachers and vice-versa. Therefore, it is important for teachers to have a clear assignment with respect to parents, a clear understanding of their role and accountability. They also need to have access to and an understanding of information important to parents, such as NCLB and student performance data. They need guidance on how best to communicate data and information to parents, and how to engage parents in dialogue that will lead to the best solutions for student achievement.

D. Expand staff training on parent involvement, focusing on student achievement and including NCLB parent involvement requirements.

Professional development was referred to positively by many administrators, teachers and other district staff during the interviews. There is a perception that training opportunities are available and that professional development is becoming more connected to academic standards and data-informed needs regarding student achievement. For example, many interviewees mention helpful training that has been offered related to cultural competency.

Building on this foundation, improvements are recommended. Given the vast responsibilities of schools and the virtually endless needs for staff training, the district must focus training on the most serious concerns and desired results. There is a need for staff training that results in partnerships with all families and especially those where student achievement is of greatest concern. Training should lead to greater empowerment of parents to learn about their rights and responsibilities (NCLB), and to engage effectively in school improvement.

It is recommended that the district ensure the penetration and application of training – to more teachers and in more schools. The district needs to make sure that the content is being applied at the classroom and school level.

E. Improve outreach and communication with parents concerning student achievement, and the requirements of NCLB.

Whereas student achievement and particularly the achievement gap are top priorities for Seattle Public Schools, communication with parents about these priorities, and NCLB as related, requires significant attention.

The requirements of NCLB should be integrated into family partnership documents and other district communications in a clear manner, and not buried within. Parent materials must be concise, easily read, and translated into the major languages that SPS parents speak. Parent materials should be reviewed from the perspective of parents, possibly with the help of parents and community organizations, to ensure their effectiveness.

It should not be assumed that any single form of communication such as a flyer, a newsletter, or a website, will reach the many diverse parents of the Seattle Public Schools. There should be a steady flow of communication, through multiple means that encourage interaction.

There is a need for more outreach to bilingual communities, and also other low income families with whom communication continues to be a challenge. Communication will improve with more proactive outreach and communication through multiple communication channels such as by hosting call-in radio shows, by using faith-based institutions as a way to reach parents, and by meeting with parents in their neighborhoods.

Further, the district needs to expand opportunities for two-way communication between parents and teachers, and parents and schools. Meetings and encounters should be centered not just on the needs of schools but also on the needs of parents, with time built in for general questions, feedback, and dialogue with parents.

There should be opportunities for school staff and parents to communicate with one another about student achievement concerns to develop a mutually agreed-upon agenda. With

better communication and focus on achievement, they can work better as a team on solutions for individual students, classrooms, schools and the district.

F. Collaborate with community organizations in developing and implementing parent involvement, NCLB and student achievement strategies.

The district should more formally recognize the importance of community organizations and articulate the role that they can, and should, play in collaboration with the district. There needs to be outreach to and collaboration with community organizations, and a continuous effort made to improve those relationships. The district should ensure that there are liaisons for community organizations with the district and/or school (depending on the nature of the organization and its relationship with education and the district), and appropriate and clear channels of communication.

G. Evaluate parent involvement practices and support best practices within the district.

SPS should establish procedures that measure and evaluate the impact of parent involvement on student achievement and on closing the achievement gap. Parents and community organizations should be part of that evaluation process. Backed by evaluation findings, the district can more effectively marshal and invest resources in parent involvement efforts targeting those areas that demonstrate the best results for improving student achievement.

H. Summary

The Seattle Public Schools has a foundation on which to build its parent involvement capacity in support of student achievement. However, for this to occur, parent involvement needs to be more clearly focused on the goal of student achievement. Building on accomplishments to date, the district needs to make substantive improvements in the consistency, quality and depth of parent involvement efforts – improvements that require not only training but focused systemic reform.