

A VIEW FROM THE CLASSROOM

Encouraging parental and community participation



Encouraging Parental and Community Participation

Connecticut will never be able to close the achievement gap if policymakers focus solely on what happens behind classroom doors. After all, children are in the care of a school for fewer than 25 percent of their waking hours. Parents, families, and communities matter.

Children who thrive in school are nourished and healthy and have opportunities to learn from the moment the schoolhouse door closes to the moment it opens the next day. They have received “wraparound” services as a part of life. They experience teaching almost every hour of their waking day, even before meeting their first schoolteacher. But many children who arrive at school do not share in these benefits.

Everyone agrees that for Connecticut to make real progress toward closing the achievement gap, all hands must be on deck. Children facing the greatest challenges in the classroom quite often face poverty, poor access to nutrition and health care, and parents who have to work multiple jobs and burn the candle at both ends to make ends meet.

Consequently, public schooling in Connecticut must be about more than simply what happens in the classroom. It must also be about the daily needs of students and their access to services, support, and resources that are enriching to the mind, body, and readiness for learning. Various cities across the country—such as Newark, New Jersey—are building community partnerships around the commonsense notion that by combining school-based social services, after-school programs, and interventions that specifically address local challenges (e.g., health, nutrition, jobs, and safety), schools can better meet the needs of all students.⁶⁰ The Say Yes to Education program in Syracuse, New York, integrates after-school programs with school-based health centers and other identified needs.⁶¹ Expanding such ingenuity to Connecticut’s neediest communities is an attainable goal offering tremendous benefits, including greater student achievement⁶² and improved graduation rates.⁶³

Health and Wellness

Policymakers must address imbalances in wraparound services and consider policies that promote a culture of learning in and out of school for more children.

Connecticut broke ground when it passed a landmark school nutrition bill that kicked sugary drinks out of schools, but its reach stopped at the federal school lunch line. School lunches remain as unhealthy and unsavory as ever, sacrificing energy kids need to grow and learn.

Just as the connection between nutrition and learning is strong,⁶⁴ learning is also connected to the general health and wellness of children.⁶⁵ Many childhood illnesses are preventable if access to health services is available. In other cases, environmental conditions disproportionately promote illness.

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Lawmakers must recognize and address the vast differences in community environments that affect the health and well-being of Connecticut children.

Lower-income communities experience disproportionately high rates of lead exposure, which in Connecticut has resulted in “lower

achievement test scores even when exposure was at levels below a minimum federal standard used for defining lead poisoning.”⁶⁶ These communities also have higher rates of asthma, a condition that is responsible for children missing 10 million school days each year across the country.⁶⁷ And, there is growing recognition that children, particularly children of color, living amidst urban violence experience post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).⁶⁸ Violence-related PTSD is linked to lower achievement among urban youth.⁶⁹ The cumulative effects are clear. Children who experience persistent illness are less prepared to learn. Bringing wellness and healthcare services into schools has proven effective at combating illness and helping children focus more on learning.

CALL TO ACTION

- ➔ Provide the services and social/health supports that children and families need under the school roof, including more registered nurses on hand to assist students and ensure that all students enter schools appropriately immunized.
- ➔ Provide a challenge grant to promote innovative, cost-efficient partnerships between school lunch programs and healthier, locally produced foods for use in the federal school lunch program.

Community and Parental Involvement

It's clear from research that “when schools, families, and community groups work together to support learning, children tend to do better in school, stay in school longer, and like school more.”⁷⁰ The more parents are involved in their child's education, the higher the child's academic achievement.⁷¹ In fact, the conclusions from more than 50 studies⁷² show that students whose parents are involved in their education, no matter what their income or background, are more likely to earn higher grades and test scores and enroll in higher-level programs; be promoted, pass their classes, and earn credits; attend school regularly; have better social skills, show improved behavior, and adapt well to school; and graduate and go on to postsecondary education.

But parents are working longer hours today than decades ago. The typical American middle-income family put in an average of 11 more hours a week in 2006 than it did in 1979.⁷³ Today, 70 percent of schoolchildren are in families with either a working single parent or a household where both parents work.⁷⁴

Lawmakers should consider innovative ways to reconnect parents to the work being asked of their children in their classrooms. Some states have begun to do this. Twelve states, including nearby Massachusetts, Rhode Island, and Vermont, provide parental leave for school-related activities. Such policies address the struggle for time that most parents face when work obligations conflict with the educational needs of their children.

There have also been other innovative approaches to increase parental engagement. In many communities, teachers are working with administration to try innovative ways to increase parental participation. In one approach to increasing parental engagement, in Stratford, Connecticut, the local union implemented an “Excellence for All” program. Through one-time private grant funding, the program offered special workshops to 100 parents, providing them with easy-to-use techniques for structuring time for student improvement and improving collaboration with teachers.

Excellence for All included Real Dads Forever sessions, which broke down barriers that stood in the way of fathers' involvement in the day-to-day school life of their children. Teachers were trained in making their instruction and interaction more culturally competent to diverse students and families. Among third-graders whose parents participated in Excellence for All, a narrower achievement gap has already been documented.



In Bridgeport, Connecticut, local educators addressed poor parental attendance at school meetings by paying for cabs. This simple idea not only worked but also helped to create a culture of involvement. As a result, parents eventually began carpooling and organizing to attend meetings.

These successes did not require much more than some innovation and a small financial commitment. With innovation, a little money can go a long way. Lawmakers should consider strategies for tapping into inexpensive innovation that helps better engage parents in the day-to-day schooling of their children.

CALL TO ACTION

- ➔ Promote incentives for employers to provide time for parents to participate in school-day activities.
- ➔ Develop a challenge grant that would promote even greater collaboration between parents and teachers.
- ➔ Provide training for School Governance Councils to promote cultural awareness and respect, and expand the training to all stakeholders.