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COMMENTARY

Leave No Parent Behind

Negotiating the New World of Data, Mandates, and Options

By Denis P. Doyle & William J. Slotnik

The national mandate to leave no child behind has gotten the lion's share of the attention in education. So far. Embedded in the No Child Left Behind law, however, are provisions designed to inform and involve parents that should emerge as "No Parent Left Behind." Indeed, NPLB should be as sweeping in its implications as AYP, the widely known and talked-about "adequate yearly progress" provisions of the federal legislation. By itself, AYP is as likely to cause friction as not; NPLB enlarges the promise of the law by making schools and parents true partners.

The No Child Left Behind Act holds school districts accountable for meeting high standards of student achievement *and* engaging the parent community. Specifically, it provides parents with unprecedented rights to gain access to student and school performance data and teacher-quality information. Parents also are given options to act when schools are underperforming. Simply put, the educational law of the land provides new opportunities and responsibilities to involve parents as rightful partners in school and district improvement.

A wealth of resources is ready for parents to tap into. The keys are infrastructure, content, and training—the cornerstones for better results and true institutional commitment.

Such involvement is being strengthened by the cultural shift resulting from greatly increased access to technology and the World Wide Web. Today's consumers expect to have massive amounts of information available with the click of a mouse. Witness the explosive growth of Amazon.com and eBay, as well as the transformation of the news media brought about by blogging and podcasting. Particularly as "parent portals" roll out, or are demanded, schools and districts will need to respond.

What do we mean by parent portals? An electronic parent portal provides easy access to education information about students, teachers, and schools via the Internet. This is as much a movement as a statutory mandate. The transparency that the No Child Left Behind law requires, and the migration of education information to the Web, will give parents and guardians unprecedented access to information about their children's academic performance and their schools (as well as other schools). And it will give everyone—parents, activists, real estate brokers, print and electronic reporters, and many others—heretofore unknown access to general information about the performance of students, schools, and districts.



— Steve Dinunno

Parent portals are critical institutionally as well as individually. Districts that engage parents in effective partnerships will improve not only student learning but the school climate. Both electronic and on-site portals are key. At the district and school levels, this requires capacity-building for parents as well as for teachers. Parents and educators must both be able to understand school-performance and teacher-qualification data to be effective partners in school accountability and improvement.

More is at stake than transparency, however; that's a necessary but not sufficient requirement. While knowing what's going on is essential, knowing what to do with that knowledge is equally critical. Without action, knowledge is inert. "No parent left behind," then, means that we need to have meaningful, two-way communication and collaboration between

parents and schools, as well as access to resources, including both online and in-person professional development. Parents need as much help as teachers and administrators do in diagnosing students' learning needs and addressing them.

The European Community's education technologists use a term that we can usefully borrow in this context: ICT—infrastructure, content, and training. If “no parent left behind” is to become a reality in American education, ICT will be central to its success. Parents will need access to computers and broadband communications, knowledge about improving student performance, and training in computer use and academic improvement.

The following three elements are particularly important for effective parent involvement.

- *Effective vehicles for parent participation.* Districts need to work jointly with community groups to strengthen parent-involvement structures. Although these may vary, an effective parent process must include forums for parent involvement, a vehicle for conducting outreach and disseminating information to diverse segments of the parent community, the provision of computer and Internet access as a bottom-line reality for all parents, and leadership development that builds parents' capacity to be active in school decisionmaking.
- *Resources for parents that are readily available online and at the schools.* Involvement is meaningful when it is informed, astute, and focused on issues of student and school performance. Resources are needed to educate parents about the requirements of the No Child Left Behind Act; assist parents in viewing their schools from a systemwide perspective, building their capacity to understand student-achievement and school-performance data; strengthen parents in understanding the curriculum and instruction program and how it responds to the needs of an increasingly diverse student population; and build the foundation to ensure a voice for traditionally underrepresented parents in school improvement efforts. These skill sets are core components of an effective school and district improvement strategy.
- *Wholesale training, building by building and district by district.* Such training has two components. It is essential to help community members use technology to communicate with each other, with their children's educators, and with community organizing groups, and to be able to receive instantaneous access to their students' records and relevant instructional resources. Training also is essential for community members and educators alike to build their collaboration skills and work toward the development and implementation of improvement strategies.

Without these three elements, No Parent Left Behind will fall short of its potential. So, too, will school and district improvement efforts. But we have reason to be optimistic about the prospects, community to community. The Christina School District in Wilmington, Del., for example, requires the school improvement planning process to engage substantial portions of the parent and student populations in analyzing school data and conditions. Philadelphia is considering citywide, affordable wireless access for all its citizens, and the city's school system has just rolled out a parent portal named familynet.

In addition, grassroots organizing groups are active on school issues throughout the country, and community-based computer-donation and -exchange programs are a charitable staple in many places. A wealth of resources is ready for parents to tap into. The keys are infrastructure, content, and training—the cornerstones for better results and true institutional commitment.

Unfortunately, some educators resist the process of opening themselves up to parental and community scrutiny. They are afraid that parents will begin to look over their shoulders and hold them up to ridicule, or worse. Yet such attitudes ignore not only the voices from the community, but also those from within the schools themselves. As evidence, the recent MetLife Survey of the American Teacher revealed that a vast majority of surveyed teachers (all within their first five years of teaching) felt that their biggest challenge was engaging and involving parents. And a significant majority of secondary students surveyed said that their schools contact their parents only when there are problems.

Far more is at work in this process than a school's revealing itself to interested parents; genuine community- and institution-building is at stake. “Know the truth and the truth shall make you free” is an injunction with meaning for schooling as well as the larger society. Over the long haul, school and community ties have to be strengthened. This, in the final analysis, is but a means to an end. The end is improved academic outcomes for all students. Leaving no parent behind is an essential step on the journey.

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