



## Fostering Family Engagement through Shared Leadership in the District, Schools, and Community

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*Successful implementation of family engagement programs requires buy-in, leadership, and collaboration at all levels – from the superintendent to parents.*

At the core of our work in Central Falls, Rhode Island, is a belief that children’s achievement is not determined by the actions of individual principals, teachers, or programs, but depends on the collaboration of many stakeholders – district, school, community, and family.

In implementing family leadership and engagement initiatives, we must ask: How do district leaders and community partners facilitate the connections between school and home that provide all parents with the opportunity to

learn, provide input, and see themselves as active participants and leaders in their child’s schools? Our success depends on buy-in, leadership, and a commitment to collaboration at all levels – from the superintendent and other district leaders, to school principals, to program staff, to teachers and school staff, to parents.

All of the links in this interconnected chain must work together in order for parent leadership, collaboration, and engagement to truly take hold.

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## CENTRAL FALLS AND THE WE ARE A VILLAGE I3 INITIATIVE

Collaboration is tough even in ideal circumstances. How do you begin to effect change when nearly half of the families in a district speak a language other than English in the home, but traditional education models rarely emphasize the strengths of cultural or linguistic diversity? Or when nearly all students live in low-income families and face social and economic challenges beyond the classroom?

Central Falls is small – just over one square mile – and densely populated. The city has struggled as jobs and opportunities have disappeared, and it now exhibits characteristics of a community whose problems are traditionally seen as intractable: 39 percent of students’ families headed by females, 93 percent receiving free or reduced-price lunch, 74 percent racial and ethnic minorities, 78 percent Hispanic, and 43 percent English language learners or living in homes with home languages other than English (Rhode Island Kids Count 2016). However, the city’s small size – along with a young, energetic group of community leaders in city hall and the district – provide a unique opportunity to investigate how collaboration can effect change within a community.

The *We Are A Village* initiative began in 2013 as a collaboration – funded by a U.S. Department of Education Investing in Innovation (i3) grant<sup>1</sup> – between the Central Falls School District (CFSD), Children’s Friend (providing Head Start and preschool), Bradley Early Childhood Clinical Research Center, and the Annenberg Institute for School Reform at Brown University. The project focuses on improving school readiness and academic achievement in five schools that serve young children, from pre-school to third grade, using strategies recommended in the Head Start Family and Community Engagement frame-

work<sup>2</sup> and embedding the evidence-based Incredible Years (IY) Teacher Classroom Management and Parenting programs.<sup>3</sup> Each of the schools established a parent hub staffed by a full-time bilingual parent collaborator. Program staff provide a variety of services including social services and referrals to community resources, IY parenting groups, “coffee hours” to meet with the principal and school staff, and support for parent-teacher groups, while also encouraging engagement in leadership and advocacy activities.

Village draws on the knowledge that collaborative relationships between families and schools, and between schools and community agencies, can greatly benefit children (Bryk et al. 2010; Administration for Children and Families 2011). We know that children do better when families are engaged in their children’s learning, support them at home, and are connected to their school (Henderson et al. 2007; Mapp & Kuttner 2013), and parent social capital and connections enhance family members’ abilities to provide those supports to their children (Webster-Stratton 1997). However, trust, opportunity, and knowledge are necessary for relationships and leadership to develop, and working from inside a district to create the opportunity to engage and draw on parent’s passion and skills requires flexible leadership from the superintendent on down to parents (Bryk et al. 2010).

## DISTRICT LEADERSHIP SETS THE STAGE

More than nine years ago, when Frances Gallo first arrived as CFSD superintendent, she set the foundation for valuing family and community engagement,

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- 1 For more on the i3 program, see <http://www2.ed.gov/programs/innovation/index.html?exp=0>.
- 2 See <http://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/hslc/hs/sr/approach/pfcef>.
- 3 See <http://incredibleyears.com/programs/>.

which continues as a priority under the current superintendent, Victor Capellan (who served as the deputy superintendent for transformation under Gallo). For over ten years, these superintendents have led the community to understand their vision of collaboration and interconnectedness: when organizations, families, business leaders, schools, and others share a commitment to improving the educational achievement of its students, a powerful synergy is created that ensures that children are ready to learn. The status quo is altered and a sense of urgency becomes the norm.

A typical day for former superintendent Gallo began as early as 5:00 a.m. Regardless of whether it was rainy, snowing, hot, or humid, she walked the square mile of our city several times a day. In her travels, she would be seen talking to a child, a parent who stopped to ask her a question, or a staff person from a community agency who offered to give her a ride (which she always turned down). Sometimes, she would be joined on these walks through the city by other district administrators. Superintendent Gallo had a visible presence in the city and the schools. Every time she entered a building, children would come running to greet her. Today, this practice continues with Superintendent Capellan.

These district leaders have brought two important qualities – community building and emotional intelligence – to their approach to family engagement. As community builders, they have created a culture of collaboration, which has inspired other stakeholders to join them in their school reform efforts, leveraging historic partnerships with local charter schools and public universities, as well as the community partners in the Village 13 grant. These leaders prioritize empathy and taking time to listen

and understand people – particularly families. They have an open door policy, despite their busy schedules, understanding that working families might not have flexible schedules. It is not unusual to see a visitor, a family, a former student, or a faculty member come by their office without an appointment to talk about any issue.

This culture of collaboration sets the standard for the entire district, valuing the resources, energy, time, and expertise of school personnel, families, and the community. In the last decade, district leadership has sparked a sense of urgency for collaboration, coordination, and deep understanding that schools cannot do it alone; reaffirming that successful partnerships are built from a strength-based perspective and require reciprocal relationships. Families and students are given a voice and asked to take an active and meaningful role in key district and school decisions, such as being part of hiring committees or building a culture of collaboration as in the Village program. District and building administrators open their doors to partnerships with families and host monthly Principal Coffee Hours to mirror the district-level Superintendent’s Forum – a topic-driven time to report and converse with families about attendance, budget, discipline, assessments, and other issues facing schools and families. As a result of this collaborative culture, schools have now become community hubs, almost replacing Central Falls’ only community center, which closed when the city declared bankruptcy.

## **CHALLENGES TO COLLABORATIONS BETWEEN TEACHERS AND PARENTS**

Studies indicate that the quality of supports a student receives both in

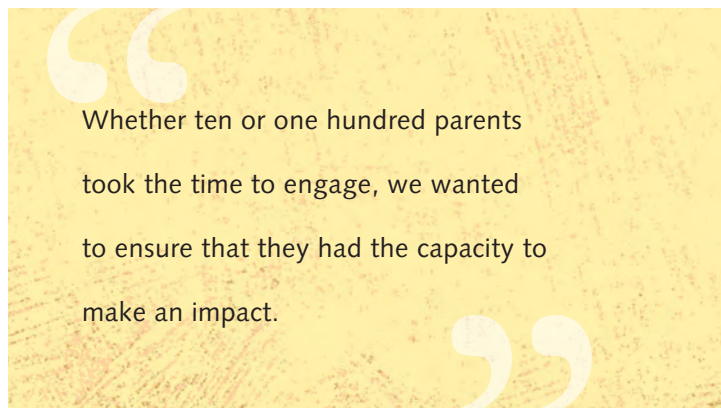
school and at home can determine their academic success (Henderson et al. 2007; Mapp & Kuttner 2013; Henderson & Mapp 2002). Unfortunately, in Central Falls and across the country there tends to be a lack of collaboration between parents and teachers. Teachers have not received formal training on how to engage families, while many families – particularly immigrants new to the U.S. – are unfamiliar with the American educational system’s expectation of parent engagement and do not feel comfortable approaching teachers or administrators.

Within the Village initiative, the lack of connections or clear understanding between two key stakeholders – teachers and parents – often got in the way of faculty buy-in. For many teachers, it was difficult to envision how parent leaders and volunteers were going to make a difference in the teaching and learning the teachers were responsible for, particularly when the parents had limited English skills. So we provided opportunities for conversations about the grant and family engagement in collaborative working groups that included classroom teachers, support staff, principals and other building leaders, district and program administrators, i3 staff, and consultants.

But deeper family-staff engagement was more difficult, largely because of scheduling issues. We very quickly realized that finding flexibility for faculty during the school day, when many parents could be available, was impossible. Teachers seemed to be available for meetings right after school, which was not realistic for many families; parents were able to come back later in the evening, which was, of course, unrealistic for teachers, most of whom live outside the city and have their own families.

We asked ourselves, “How do we get these two very important stakeholders

in the life of the child to value each other and recognize the benefits of having involved parents?” We wanted teachers to move from a focus on quantity (“How many parents will show up?”) to understanding the impact that even a handful of parents can have on the culture and climate of the school. Initially, Village placed a premium on building strength through small interactions. Whether ten or one hundred parents took the time to engage, we wanted to ensure that they



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The personal connections between parent volunteers who worked with school staff to support individual students or classroom activities acted as a starting point to build family-teacher coalitions that could support improved outcomes for children across the district. Through these initial connections, further activities were planned, like cultural nights, beautification projects, or a large literacy event, which could engage larger groups of families.

### **FAMILIES SHOW THEIR VALUE WHEN GIVEN THE CHANCE**

Prior to the grant, there were numerous opportunities for families to engage with district leadership. A

districtwide Parent Governing Body and the Superintendent’s Forum established by former superintendent Gallo showed families that she cared deeply about families and their perspectives. To an outside observer, it was clear that there was a strong group of parents with a voice and skills to advocate effectively.

For example, in 2011 a group of parents concerned about the dress code brought the issue to the superintendent, who encouraged them to present a petition for school uniforms to the board of trustees. Parents were delighted to receive a mandate from the board to survey all families in the district and present their results. They met with state legislators to advocate for legislation regarding school uniforms and continued with an outreach campaign to increase community awareness of their uniform policy petition. Five years later, there is a districtwide, enforceable uniform policy, and families engaged at all levels to support those who might not be able to afford uniforms.

However, outside of the group of parents that had organized around the uniform policy, uncertainty persisted. Parents, particularly those with children in lower grades, were often unsure about how to engage meaningfully with the schools. Perhaps because these parents are typically younger and have less experience in the workings of the schools, they were also less comfortable with their role as advocates. We see two activities as integral to building leadership among families in Village schools: first, providing family members with space and opportunity to connect with and engage one another; and second, offering leadership and advocacy training and ongoing opportunities for family members to think through their goals and ideas as a group.

### **Providing Space and Facilitating Connection**

Though it may seem simple, the first step to building parent engagement in the lower grades was giving parents a space to be comfortable in the schools. We designated “family hubs” in each school where parents could get coffee, use a computer, or meet with each other or school staff. This small step jumpstarted the parent engagement process by showing parents that the school cared enough about their presence to make dedicated space available to them to congregate, connect with each other to discover and discuss common concerns, and volunteer. Being located in the schools supported families’ abilities to develop ongoing relationships with staff and helped to maintain focus on education and supporting children.

Beyond those basic elements, however, different schools used these spaces in very different ways, illustrating the variety of opportunities for family engagement. At the pre-K, which was already a relatively warm and welcoming place for families, the hub saw wide use by parent volunteers and leaders, visitors, and teachers and staff as a space to meet with parents. Here, though classic parent leadership was slow to evolve – for example, a PTO wasn’t formed until midway through the second year of the grant – the constant presence of parents in the school played a supportive role by enhancing the inviting climate. We strongly believe that the environment and openness parents experience as they enter and interact with others sets a foundation for confident engagement as their children move through the schools.

At the elementary school, in contrast, the hub was used almost exclusively by parent volunteers. A small and close-knit group would work together on projects that supported the school; plan activities and upcoming meetings;

discuss concerns, interests, and desired outcomes for their families; and learn from each other or program staff. Because the parent collaborator also supported parents in identifying and pursuing their own goals, parents placed a premium on building their skills and abilities and expanding the existing work of the parent-teacher group as advocates for the school. The result is a highly engaged and powerful group of parent leaders who have grown more deeply connected to each other and the inner workings of the school.

These two examples show that parents can be engaged – and need to be engaged – in different ways depending on their strengths and interests, their children’s needs, and likely, many other factors. Simply setting up the family hubs was not a panacea that immediately increased parent engagement; it was important to build in flexibility to allow the hubs to be used in the ways that best served specific school communities.

### **Building Skills and Confidence of Parent Leaders**

Living in a city like Central Falls can be isolating. Limited public transportation and high rates of mobility may compound individual barriers to getting out of the house, meeting others, or developing relationships – barriers such as high stress levels, health and mental health conditions, or working multiple jobs or unusual hours (Cutrona, Wallace & Wesner 2006). Limited social connections also cut families off from networks that might help them build connections to traditional institutions like schools (de Souza Briggs 1998).

We often hear from parents who had frequent negative school experiences and now have limited contact with staff except when something bad happens at school. Getting parents interested and comfortable enough to enter the family hubs and engage with

the schools took work from the Village staff and volunteer Parent Peer Navigators (PPNs) – parents who expressed interest in leadership and advocacy and committed time to volunteer.

The core of our support for PPNs is the Family Leadership Institute (FLI), a twelve-hour workshop that engages with parents as advocates and leaders in the schools and community. The program focuses on building parents’ connections with one another, teaching about the structure and process of interacting with the schools, training in advocacy and leadership in school and community, and building parent beliefs in their ability to change the schools. Participants are drawn from across the district and are supported to continue meeting after the FLI to work on goals outlined during the initial workshops.

When this process works effectively, we saw parents build strong networks of support and volunteers become advocates. Over the course of the FLI and subsequent meetings, relationships develop between families across the schools. Parents arrange to help each other with childcare or other duties so they can participate in meetings or workshops in the schools. Families also help one another to navigate social service resources and the school system, and they give each other advice on approaching faculty about issues affecting their children.

This year, families are advocating for improved communication with the city and increased family engagement opportunities across schools. They are in ongoing discussions with city officials on how to increase community awareness of events, concerns, and meetings. At the district level, they have taken steps to reestablish the cross-district parent leadership group and are working to build systems to engage families across all schools, instead of only their own children’s school.

Developing these ongoing groups after

the FLI ends has been a challenging process. Of the four trainings we held over the course of the grant, only two parent groups continued to meet regularly, and only the most recent have continued for more than a couple of months. The key to successful groups seems to depend on our ability to step back after providing the FLI training, giving parents the lead. We model creating agendas, identifying stakeholders, and creating to-do lists and next steps. As meetings continue and leaders emerge, we step into a “consultant” role. We provide support and feedback on group processes, or help to make connections when asked, but leave parent leaders to develop the content and action steps with little to no input from us. We try to step into the follow-up meetings with no agenda, open to supporting families to pursue whichever goals they choose, and in any way they need from us. This process can be challenging, since we have our own ideas of what is best, but as a result, we see parents who are more committed to their work and seem more highly engaged overall.

In a community like Central Falls, where English is not the primary language for nearly half of families, and over 70 percent are cultural, ethnic, or racial minorities, a network of parents with a strong connection and commitment to the schools has a huge impact – not just through the great work parent leaders do as individuals, but also as the foundation of a stronger, more cohesive community. The presence of these parent leaders helps to build trust among other parents, and coupled with the work of family engagement staff, increases the schools’ understanding and sensitivity to the needs of the community while providing a platform for PPNs and others to advocate for the interests of families.

## RECOMMENDATIONS FOR PRACTICE

Helping parents feel comfortable and welcomed in their children’s school is a job for everyone. We all benefit from conditions that enable parents to easily engage with district and school leaders, and the expectation set by leaders that families are paramount. However, simply saying these things doesn’t make them so. Based on our experience in Central Falls, we offer the following recommendations for creating an environment that welcomes commitment by families:

- Capitalize on the leadership and buy-in of the superintendent and school principals to set the foundation for teacher-parent partnerships and leadership.
- Recognize that a small number of highly engaged families can have an outsized impact; focus on quality of engagement rather than quantity.
- Use staff or family concerns, such as the school uniform policy, as opportunities to review and strengthen policies and protocols around family engagement (including workshops, trainings, background checks, and orientations for parent volunteers).
- Create a dedicated space in every school for families to meet, network, and establish a regular presence at the school.
- Take the pulse of the schools and their relationships with families. Ask, “What are the barriers preventing families from engaging, and what can we do to help?” In Central Falls, the most obvious challenge was a language barrier, and our solution was to ensure that Village staff members were bilingual.
- Provide leadership training for parents. When families are prepared and able to engage, their confidence

builds, and they will (perhaps little by little) gain the respect of teachers and clerical staff who see their commitment and dedication day in and day out.

- Support teachers and school staff to develop positive relationships with parents by providing activities or professional development opportunities designed to promote trust and respect.

Daily in the Village schools, teachers, secretaries, staff, and other parents saw a cadre of parent volunteers, some with very limited English skills, proudly walking through the school doors early in the morning, ready to help the children learn. The impact of these personal moments and interactions cannot be understated. In the three years since the Village initiative's inception, the commitment and dedication of families has gained the respect of the school faculty and administrators. They notice if the PPN is not in school. Instead of suspiciously asking, "Why is that parent here?" the question today is, "Where are the parents? What am I going to do without their support?"

In Central Falls, we have discovered that the work of true family engagement can be slow, hard, and painful at times, but very rewarding. Perhaps there are not hundreds of parents in the school, but the number of engaged parents has certainly grown. Several of those parents who started as volunteers have secured permanent positions in the district as teacher assistants, lunch aides, or childcare providers during school functions. The rewards have been realized only as a result of the collaboration, leadership, and buy-in from the entire Village.

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