



21st Century School-Family Family Involvement: Learning About and *From* Families and Communities

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Ms. Baines and Mrs. Tisdale's first graders are excited to be in school. One reason is that the teachers make important connections between the children's families, and communities and their schoolwork. For example, the children interviewed community elders and wrote books about them. The teachers and children also wrote books using the music of the children's communities and heritage. The books were then used to teach important reading skills such as high frequency words, phonics, and reading fluency.

Parents flock to Mr. Hill's third grade classroom. Mr. Hill also finds ways to tap into community strengths and legacies. He and his all-male classroom engaged in a study of local barbershops. They interviewed barbers, consulted with the music teacher on barbershop quartets, and conducted other similar projects with community members. ALL of his students exceeded the district's and state's benchmarks.

Ms. Tyler, a middle school art teacher, built on her students' interest in hair by documenting their hairstyles and connecting with art standards such as learning about patterns as well as learning about the depictions of hairstyles by artists, studying sculptors, and connecting to related biographical works and science (e.g., chemical content of hair products). Who knew that learning about students' hair could lead to study of mathematics, history and social studies, and science!

Other teachers such as Mr. Lenard, ninth-grade math teacher, and Mr. Boyles, ninth grade science teacher use information about students' lives and communities to teach their content area. Once, Mr. Lenard used the concept of selling burnt CDs to teach about mathematical functions. Mr. Boyles routinely uses hip hop to teach chemical concepts. Both have sustained these approaches for years and their students' excel academically.

What do all of these teachers know that is foundational to successful teaching? They understand that they can build more effective curriculum by learning *from* families and communities and building relationships *with* them. So, how might School Improvement Councils provide support for the kind of relationship-building that such teaching requires? One suggestion is to think about how we define family-school involvement (table is adapted from an article by Boutte & Johnson, forthcoming).

Traditional Family-School Involvement	21st Century Family-School Involvement
Information flows one way: from school to home.	Information flows both ways: families and community members are partners in building curriculum.
Schools make efforts to learn <i>about</i> families	Schools make efforts to learn not only about, but <i>with</i> and <i>from</i> families
Attempts to learn about the community; attempts are largely in-school based	Efforts to learn about the community are through teacher engagement <i>in</i> the community
Curriculum may be designed on a “one size fits all” cultural model often starting with that students <i>do not</i> know.	Curriculum is tailored to the strengths and needs of students because teachers know families and communities; curriculum starts with what students <i>do</i> know.
Few collaborative discussions with parents to gain their insights for promoting student success.	Families and community members are integral to school discussions about issues such as curriculum, testing, special education and gifted placements, coursework, disciplinary measures, etc.

Getting Started: Questions for SIC Discussions:

1. How can SICs help teachers and families/communities build relationships that focus on learning *from* as well as about students and families (creating a two-way relationship)?
2. How can SICs support teachers in spending time in communities (e.g., places of worship, restaurants, community centers, homes) to build relationships, and learn about the wisdom in students’ lives and about community resources (businesses, institutions, agencies, people) available to support students (tutoring; sponsors for field trips, in and out of school mentoring)?
3. How can schools help teachers learn how to build from family and community resources to construct meaningful curriculum?
4. How can School Improvement Councils ensure that collaborative dialogues are sustained?

SICs, as broad-based constituent groups in their school communities, can take a unique and active role in relationship building to support classroom learning. By looking at new ways to foster family-school involvement and asking the right questions, School Improvement Councils can help build the vital connections necessary for student success.

Resources (2-minute video clips and readings)

1. <http://www.tolerance.org/tdsi/asset/tapping-community-and-home-resources>
2. <http://www.tolerance.org/tdsi/asset/community-visits-pre-service-teachers>
3. <http://www.tolerance.org/tdsi/asset/know-your-students-well>

4. Boutte, G. S., & Hill, E. (2006). African American communities: Implications for educators. *New Educator*, 2, 311-329.
5. López-Robertson, J., Long, S., & Turner-Nash, K. (2010). First steps in constructing counter narratives of young children and their families. *Language Arts*, 88 (2), 94-103.

Dr. Susi Long and Dr. Gloria Boutte hold the Yvonne and Schuyler Moore Endowed Chair at the University of South Carolina. Their emphasis is on advocating on behalf of children and their families so that they can reach their fullest potentials. Drs. Boutte and Long are available for consultation with School Improvement Councils as well as with teacher, family, and community groups to help in the development of 21st century school-community relationships and curriculum-building. gsboutte@mailbox.sc.edu; slong@mailbox.sc.edu and you can meet them in person at the SIC Annual Meeting on March 23!