Parent Involvement, Leadership, and School Communities

Parent involvement and educational leadership have been two dominant themes in the school reform debate during the past several years. Legions of educational researchers studying both public and private schools since the early 1980s have made it clear that active parents and strong principals are ingredients for school success. Schools require capable leaders who possess vision: a vision of where they want to take their schools, and a vision of how to get there. Likewise, schools necessarily rely on the support and involvement of parents in their children’s academic development. When schools possess strong leadership, a clear vision, and the support of parents in pursuing that vision, they function as communities in which the parents, teachers, and administrators work together for the ultimate benefit of the students.

How can a principal be strong and visionary while also sharing decision-making powers with parents and teachers? How does a school reconcile the seemingly disparate needs for strong leadership and broad participation? The answers lie in the processes and structures of governance, the careful deliniation of roles, and mutual respect. Alliance for Achievement is a model for building school communities that provides a process through which the principal, teachers, and parents articulate a common base of educational values, set goals, and develop expectations for one another. The Alliance for Achievement Network, a consortium of schools using the Alliance model to build distinct school communities, is helping principals be strong leaders while involving parents and teachers.

By now the educational community knows much about parent involvement. It knows, for example, that there are essentially four types of parent involvement: the basic obligations of preparing children for school; communicating with the school; participating in on-site school activities; and becoming involved in learning activities at home (Epstein 1987). Field researchers have also identified the essential qualities of successful parent involvement.
involvement programs, such as ascertaining parents' interests, rewarding participation, scheduling events that involve student performances, and offering easy access to participation by continually welcoming new faces (Krasnow 1990, 14). With the link between parent involvement and academic success now firmly established (Walberg 1984), educational organizations have developed a myriad of successful programs and practices designed to foster parent involvement (see, for example, Goodson, Swartz and Millsap 1991).

Yet if there is a growing understanding of successful parent involvement strategies, programs that assist educators in bringing parents into the school, the issue of school leadership remains more vexing. On the one hand there is little question about the distinguishing qualities of good leaders, the ways in which they exercise their leadership, and the bearing this has on the formation of strong, focused school communities. On the other hand, there are few practical programs that help principals become more effective leaders on the job. There are few programs that take into account the exigencies of day-to-day administration that all principals face, yet at the same time give them concrete strategies that enable them to become better leaders by helping them enlist the support of parents and teachers in the community building process. Alliance for Achievement fills this void.

Communities of Leaders

One of the most recent attempts to address this issue in a general and comprehensive fashion is Roland Barth's book, Improving Schools from Within (1990). Barth argues that the notion of "community" is central to the conception of both a good school and a healthy workplace. Good schools accordingly function as communities. On one level, good schools function as "communities of learners" in which all members encourage each others's pursuits. On another level good schools function as "communities of leaders," in which all members share in the opportunities for, and responsibilities of, decision-making.

Barth's answer to the question of cultivating strong leadership is thus to create communities of leaders. Principals can strengthen their leadership by involving all members of the school community in the leadership process. Barth suggests, for example, that both students and teachers can become leaders when given duties that carry school-wide responsibility, as long as they are genuinely entrusted with such responsibilities and given the principal's full support.

Barth also makes some suggestions to help principals create a community of leaders: relinquish authority, spread responsibility, and share in success and failure (122–146).

Yet the principal, the traditional leader of the school community, is still left to his or her own devices in beginning the process of building a community of leaders. If they are to articulate a mission and share responsibility, where are they to begin? What steps must they take, not only to begin this process, but to sustain it, and to do so while continuing to meet
their day-to-day administrative responsibilities? Alliance for Achievement is a model that gives principals step-by-step guidance for creating not only a strong school community, but also a community of leaders.

**Alliance for Achievement: A Guide for Principals**

By its very nature the Alliance for Achievement model encourages the creation of a community of leaders. The engine of change in Alliance for Achievement is a School Community Council (SCC) comprised of parents, teachers, and the principal, an arrangement which cultivates shared decision-making and representation of all constituencies in the school community. In the SCC, parents, teachers, and the principal work together to identify goals, build consensus, and develop coherent strategies and programs. By the very fact that it is a representative body, the SCC ensures that each group in the school community has a chance to play a leadership role in community building. By giving them concrete structures, guidelines, and support, Alliance for Achievement can help principals create communities of leaders in the process of implementing Barth’s recommendations.

**A. Articulating a Mission**

The first task in creating a community of leaders—Barth’s first "principle for principals"—is to identify and articulate a school mission and to identify goals for realizing it. If principals are to involve school community members in the leadership process, to gain their assistance in leading the school in positive directions, there must be a clear statement of what those directions are. As a community of leaders and learners, every school needs a clear statement of where it is going and how it will reach that destination.

The principal lays the groundwork for a community of leaders by establishing a School Community Council to help him or her articulate the school’s mission. Forming an SCC gives the principal an opportunity to get representation from those constituencies most directly connected to the well-being of the school’s students, parents, and teachers. The SCC ensures that the mosaic of perspectives comprising the school community will be reflected in the school’s vision and mission, which are so crucial to institutional effectiveness.

When a principal uses Alliance for Achievement to help mold the school’s vision, educational values form the heart of that vision. Alliance for Achievement helps make educational values a part of the school’s mission by guiding the SCC through a process of introspection and debate about the core educational values for the school. Educational values are qualities, attitudes, and habits that members of the school community deem most important for the successful academic development of their children. Educational values are abilities and characteristics that members of the school community wish their children to carry with them throughout their lives. The Alliance Planning Guide defines educational values and provides a test by which to measure whether or not the values under consideration...
by the SCC satisfy those definitions, ensuring that the vision and goals established by the school community are indeed educational. The Planning Guide also provides examples of educational values to help the SCC move in the right direction. These parameters allow the principal to open up the process of articulating a mission to teachers and parents within a controlled framework. This framework focuses the efforts of school community leaders and enables the principal to exercise his or her leadership in cooperation with others, the first step in building a community of leaders.

By giving parents and teachers an opportunity to help shape the school’s educational mission, the principal affords them the gratification of sharing leadership in the areas of life most meaningful to them. Alliance gives teachers a stake in determining the educational goals to which they, as educators, aspire. Alliance also helps principals benefit from the expertise of parents, who are the players best positioned to identify the attitudes, values, and habits they consider to be most important for their children.

This kind of cooperation opens the door to shared leadership by helping parents, teachers, and principals cooperatively identify those areas of responsibility where the roles of the school and home overlap. When locally determined values, goals, and expectations form the core of the school’s educational mission, this mission reflects the specific character of the school and the experiences of its school community members.

B. Sharing Responsibility and Authority

Barth’s second major "principle for principals" has to do with sharing responsibility and authority. Barth argues that communities of leaders are built when principals turn authority over to teachers, entrust them with responsibilities, and share in the attendant successes and failures. That means principals must take risks in building communities of leaders, because responsibilities must sometimes go to "leaders" who are untested. Alliance for Achievement, however, offers principals a mechanism for relinquishing some important responsibilities to teachers and parents while maintaining a measure of control over the process.

Alliance for Achievement provides for the establishment of SCC sub-committees, also comprised of parents and teachers, which take responsibility for arranging parent/teacher education programs related to the school’s values. SCC sub-committees also establish communication methods to enhance communication among parents, teachers, and students. The creation of sub-committees again enables principals to spread the circle of leadership by allowing parents and teachers to arrange activities that have a direct bearing on both their own work (in the case of teachers) and on the well-being of their children (in the case of parents).

Parent and teacher education is essential in a community of leaders. When a school functions as a community its members are aware of its mission and are continually learning new ways to fulfill it. Parents can always learn new methods for nurturing positive attitudes and habits in their children, and teachers can always learn how to be better educators. By forming parent/teacher education sub-committees, principals turn responsibility
over to those who are best positioned to take it: parents and teachers. In the process parents and teachers become leaders in their own education.

Likewise, good two-way communication between school and home, as well as communication within the school, is necessary for a strong and focused school community. Once a mission has been articulated, the SCC must develop ways to ensure that the mission remains in the consciousness of all school community members. By involving parents and teachers on sub-committees responsible for developing and monitoring school-home communication, the principal gives them a sense of ownership in a crucially important facet of the school community. Parents are the best judges of what works for school-home communication and can serve as valuable resources when given leadership roles in developing communication methods. Similarly, teachers are most familiar with the challenges of communicating with parents in the home, and should be part of any strategy for developing good communication links within the school and between school and home. Alliance for Achievement helps a principal formalize the involvement of both these groups while developing value-related communication methods. These methods, in turn, help all school community members move toward the goals of the school community.

Conclusion

Not all teachers and not all parents will respond enthusiastically to initiatives designed to widen the circle of leaders within a school community. With leadership comes responsibility, and with responsibility comes hard work, challenge and frustration. Many teachers have their hands full with the day-to-day realities of classroom instruction, and many parents are pulled in a multiplicity of directions simply by the demands of providing for the material needs of their families. These realities make the call to building communities of leaders a sometimes daunting prospect.

The urgency of this call, however, is made clear in a recent survey of teachers in the Chicago public schools (Consortium on Chicago School Research 1991). The survey of over 12,000 teachers measured their opinions on a range of issues, including their views on Chicago school reform, instructional change, and school communities. One-third of the teachers in the survey reported that they teach in environments that lack collegiality. Statistics such as this highlight the importance of tapping the latent leadership capabilities present in every school community. Within every school are committed parents and dedicated teachers who are capable of helping meet the challenges of building strong, focused school communities in which children have room to grow personally and intellectually. Alliance for Achievement is a model which helps the traditional leader of the school community, the principal, cultivate a community of leaders by involving parents and teachers in the process of articulating a mission, and in making that mission a reality for all.
References:

Barth, Roland. 1990. *Improving schools from within: Teachers, parents, and principals can make the difference.* San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.


Doug McCullough is director of the Alliance for Achievement Network, a consortium of schools building strong school communities based on educational values.