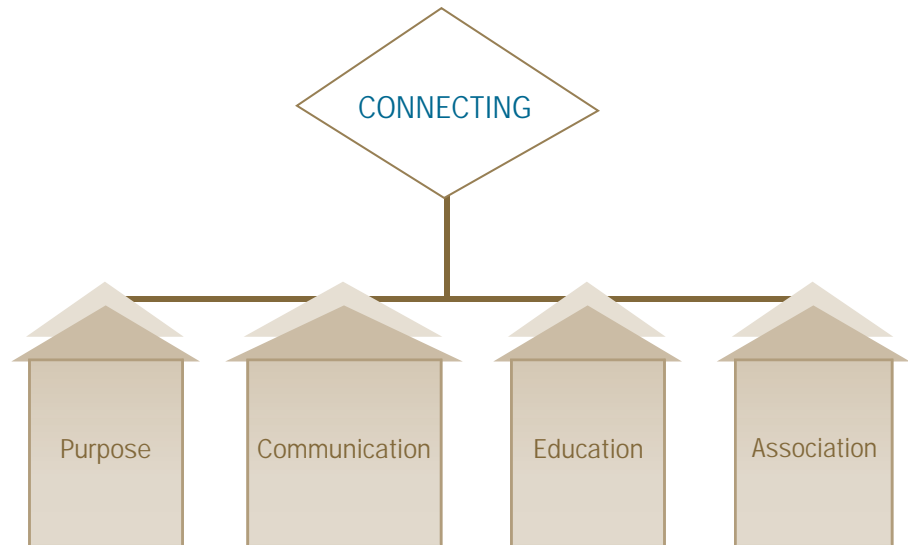## CHAPTER FOUR
Connecting—The School as Community

Isn't it interesting that schooling, where children come to know the world, is described with the terminology of big business, government bureaucracy, and the military? Models, systems, processes, structures, and outcomes are concepts applied to schooling but borrowed from the lexicon of large, formal organizations, which are typically devoted to products less tender than the hearts and minds of children. This is not a new phenomenon, but one whose beginning coincides with the emergence of the public school system in America in the nineteenth century. From the pluralistic irregularities of single schools operated by headmasters grew multi-school districts, state credentialing, and standardization of curriculum within each state. With complexity came the requirement for management, and management depends upon quantification, the measurement of processes and outcomes, and hierarchical chains of decision-making. The modern school district and state systems of education came of age along with the blooming of industrialism in America, and in time education adopted industry's methods of management, placing them within the regulatory protocols of government bureaucracy.

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                    ◇ CONNECTING ◇

        🏠          🏠          🏠          🏠
     Purpose   Communication  Education   Association
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In the long march toward managed systems of schooling, there have been voices lamenting the loss of *Gemeinschaft*, the face-to-face bonds of community that might be found in less formal organizations. In fact, some observers attribute the inadequacies of public schooling to the invasion of scientific management and the abandonment of the gentler virtues of caring and personal commitment to shared values in children's acculturation (Sergiovanni, 1999). Likewise, American education never fully shed vestiges of its roots, maintaining stubborn adherence to local control of schools and democratic participation in limited aspects of school governance.

Making the case that parochial schools produce greater outcomes for less cost than public schools, even controlling for the socio-economic status of students, James Coleman (1987; 1990; Coleman & Hoffer, 1987) attributed much of the parochial school's advantage to the functional community inherent among its constituents. The fact that Catholic schools exhibit good results with non-Catholic children in inner cities shows that community can be created by the school and is not necessarily an extension of pre-existing community within a parish. Coleman found that parochial schools engender a sense of belonging, in part because parents make the conscious choice to send their children to them, thus electing to belong to them. He also pointed to another distinguishing characteristic of parochial schools: a religion-based, foundational assumption that each child, created in the image of God, possesses an individual dignity and worth. That respect for individual worth compels the adults in a child's life, including teachers

and other school personnel, to attend to the child's learning and moral development with exceptional devotion and sense of service. Parochial schools also understand the importance of the family to the child's academic success and the value of connection among the families of children who spend their daily lives together in a school. In Coleman's view, intergenerational closure—the connections of communication and association between the child, the child's schoolmates, and the parents of these children—contributes to the social capita available to children and the level of community among the constituents of a school.

What Coleman found in parochial schools exists also in some public schools: a sense of belonging, communication and association among constituents, and devotion to each child's learning and development. Learning standards give schools a value-orientation, a common purpose around which students, teachers, and parents can rally, and a gauge by which each child's progress can be measured as well as the progress of the school as a whole. Some public schools have also been successful in fully engaging parents in the learning lives of their children, promoting a partnership between the family and the school that fosters community and, in turn, a community that fosters partnership.

The connections among the people associated with a school, the intergenerational and intragenerational bonds, the commitment to purpose, and the devotion to each child's success do not occur by happenstance, but by design and careful attention. The Mega System does not give these intangibles short shrift, but provides vehicles through which they can be achieved. The connection between the school and the home, best viewed as the relationships between partners within one community of the school, is paramount. No less important are the connections within each of these groups—parents connected with other parents, teachers with other teachers, and students with other students. The Mega System's concept of shared leadership through teams playing essential roles in decision-making is one of these vehicles. An individualized approach to instruction of a common curriculum is another. Above all, the Mega System promotes a value-based purpose for the school, definition of roles, and clear expectations of the constituents of a school community—students, parents, teachers, school staff, and volunteers. The nexus of expectation and obligation is primal, and upon it trust is built.

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While this chapter will deal primarily with school-home relationships that encourage parental support for children's learning, the other connections within the school community are no less important. The classroom culture discussed in Chapter 3 emphasizes the essential interactions and relationships between the teacher and students in a classroom that solidify each student's sense of belonging. A student, first and foremost, must feel that the teacher knows him, cares about him, and is vitally concerned about his well-being and progress. That sense of connectedness makes effective instruction possible. Each teacher's sense of connectedness, personal investment in the success of school, and interest in the professional satisfaction of colleagues buoys spirits and makes difficult work rewarding.

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In Chapter 3, we discussed the school's curriculum—the body of knowledge and set of skills that the school intends for its students to master. The home also has a curriculum. The "curriculum of the home" is the bundle of attitudes, habits, knowledge, and skills that children acquire, through their relationship with their family, that facilitates their school learning. Learning can be propelled, to a certain degree, by a child's innate curiosity and desire for competence, but school learning requires the discipline and persistence to complete assignments and master difficult material long after the initial curiosity has been satisfied. Ideally, parents fan the flames of the child's curiosity and also mold the practical habits and turn of mind that keep the child doggedly on task until the job is done.

The school is most effective when the home does its part. Therefore, the *connection* between the school and the home is essential to school improvement and school success. Helping parents fully engage in the learning lives of their children is a necessary function of the school, and one that requires considerable, consistent, and competent attention. A fruitful connection between the school and the home is built upon purpose, communication, education, and association. Cumulatively, the connections among the teachers, staff, and students form the web of community, a community of the school. A school community is not the school's affiliation with external agencies, nor is it a place. A school community is found in the relationships among the people intimately attached to a school—the students, their teachers, the families of the students, the school's staff, and active volunteers. The people know their school community's *purpose,* what they value in the education of their children, and everyone's role in getting the job done. The members of a school community *communicate* about these values, the expectations they have of one another, the roles they play, and the progress they are making. The members of a school community *educate* themselves and one another to perform their roles more competently. They *associate* with one another to strengthen their relationships and amplify the effects of their individual contributions to children's learning and personal development.
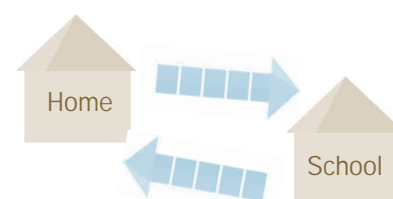
The school is most effective when the home does its part. Therefore, the *connection* between the school and the home is essential to school improvement and school success.

Knowing what is included in the curriculum of the home is as important as knowing what is included in the school's curriculum.
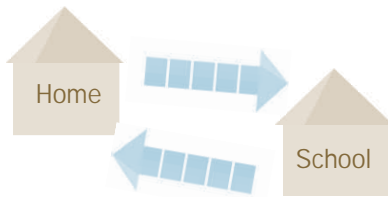
Engaging parents in the learning lives of their children *sounds* like a good idea. In fact, most parents have been engaged in every aspect of their children's lives since their children were born. For a school to guide and channel that natural engagement toward activities that most directly support the child's school learning is an efficient way to improve student learning outcomes. So why is "parent involvement" considered a peripheral aspect of schooling in the frenzied pursuit for gains in assessments in reading, mathematics, science, and social studies? While home environments correlate strongly with student learning outcomes, schools can be dissuaded from investing in their connections with families through a short-sighted focus on what the school does within its walls, during its scheduled day, within the confines of its own methods and its own curriculum. And yet, asked what obstacles they face in achieving the results they desire for their students, teachers will invariably cite inadequacies in parents' preparation of their children for school learning.

The school's success, as measured by the demonstrated accretion of student learning such as we see on achievement tests and standards-based assessments, is the aggregate of the learning of each individual student. In the classroom, we establish a culture that is conducive to learning, and we also target instruction to meet the needs of each student. This same combination of conducive culture and individual attention pertains to the school community and the curriculum of the home. The school community provides the culture that encourages each family to provide the curriculum of the home. Knowing what is included in the curriculum of the home is as important as knowing what is included in the school's curriculum. Just what attitudes, habits, skills, and knowledge do we expect families to instill in children? How does the school community— through purpose, communication, education, and association—build a culture of expectation and support and also provide opportunities for parents to gain greater competence in helping their children master the curriculum of the home?

We use the term "school community" to describe the connections among people intimately attached to a school—students, teachers, staff, parents, volunteers. "Community" is an amorphous term, subject to misuse. It is important to be exact in our use of the term here. We are not speaking of a community as something apart from the school, as in school-community relations. Our reference is to the internal community that binds its members to the school and to each other. We speak of a face-to-face community among the people who share a common devotion to the children in their midst, including

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the children themselves. This community is strengthened when it is made distinct, when its values, rituals, traditions, and practices are distinctly its own. It is a true community when its members are in association with one another, communicating with one another about the values they share, the progress they make, and the roles each of its members plays.

Figure 1 shows the interactions among school and home variables that impact school learning and student success, within a community of the two. While this schematic focuses on the school community and its impact on family behaviors, a similar graphic might demonstrate the school community's effects on the teachers and other school personnel. The box in the figure called "school community" represents the relationships among the people intimately attached to the school. In reality, these relationships are not something apart from "schooling," but are an aspect of schooling that deserves special notice. Just as the school's programs, schedules, curriculum, decision-making structures, and instructional methods are developed intentionally, so must the relationships among the members of the school community be fostered by design, understood, tended to, measured, and brought to a standard of excellence.
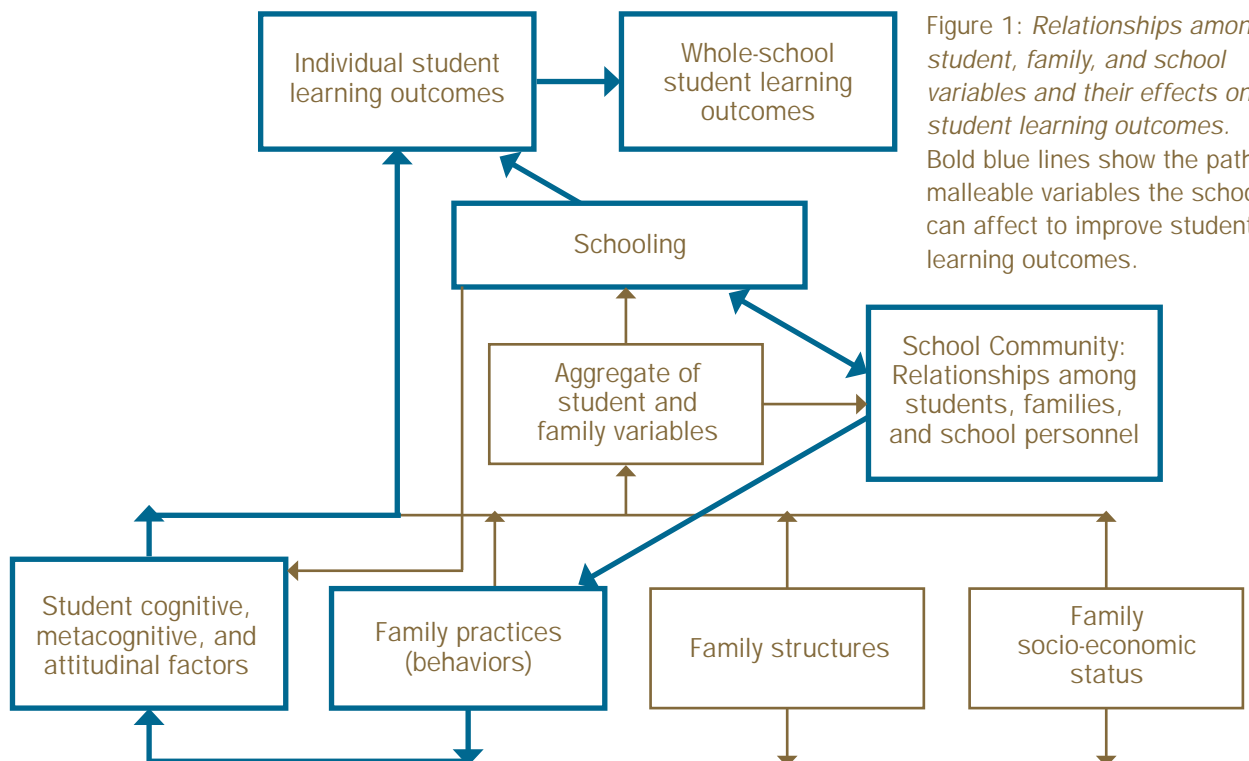
Figure 1: *Relationships among student, family, and school variables and their effects on student learning outcomes.* Bold blue lines show the path of malleable variables the school can affect to improve student learning outcomes.

Figure 1 differentiates among family structures, family socioeconomic status, and family practices. Family structure includes the number of parents and other adults in the home and the number and ages of the children. Family socioeconomic status includes the family financial circumstances and parents' level of education. Family practices include the routines of family life, the relationships among its members, and the actual behaviors of family members. The curriculum of the home resides in family practices, although it would be unrealistic to underestimate the mitigating influences of family size and family financial resources on family practices. Within the school community, the important rule is to not let family structure and family socioeconomic status become conversation stoppers. Instead, the conversation must revolve around family practices, with creativity and insight applied in helping parents overcome the weight of difficult circumstances in order to maintain the relationships with their children that encourage constructive attitudes, habits, and skills. The family's poverty does not negate the child's need for nurture or the school's obligation to help parents understand their role. The absence of a father in the home makes the job tougher for mom, but the child's needs remain the same nonetheless. Recognizing this fact, the school can help mom get the job done.

While the curriculum of the home provides a behavioral checklist of family practices that predict children's school success, we are discovering that much must be read between the lines. Somewhere in the parent-child relationship, children acquire a sense of expectation and perception of their own efficacy in "measuring up." Children internalize their parents' expectations of them regarding school learning, and they also absorb signals from parents as to their own ability to meet these expectations. William Jeynes (2002) found the nuances of parent-child communication regarding expectations to be a particularly powerful source of motivation for minority children and children living in poverty. These children especially benefit from visions of what is possible for them beyond the circumstances in which they find themselves at the time, and their parents contribute both to that vision and to the children's confidence that they can reach out and attain it (Hoover-Dempsey, 2005).

Henderson and Mapp (2002) conducted a thorough review of two decades of research on parent involvement, structuring their examination around three topics: studies on the impact of family and community involvement on student achievement; studies on effective strategies to connect schools, families, and community;

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and studies on parent and community organizing efforts to improve schools. There is substantial evidence that family engagement in children's learning is beneficial, but the evidence that school-based initiatives can influence family behaviors in ways that impact learning is limited to small-scale investigations of specific strategies that are productive for those families that most directly access them. Studies of whole-school effects are typically *ex post facto*, in the tradition of effective schools research that examines the characteristics of successful schools rather than validating the value added to learning by experimental interventions.

From the evidence available, Henderson and Mapp draw convincing conclusions about the characteristics of successful school efforts to engage families. Most specifically, effective school initiatives to engage parents: 1) build a foundation of trust and respect, 2) connect parent-engagement strategies to learning objectives, and 3) reach out to engage parents beyond the school. These three qualities are found in schools where parent involvement is measurably high, in specific programs that demonstrate effects on learning outcomes, and in schools that exhibit high levels of achievement. Henderson and Mapp echo the conclusions of Swap (1993) that effective parent engagement must be comprehensive in nature, with the school consistently interfacing with parents at many points, in many venues, over the course of the schooling years.

Not letting family circumstances stop the ongoing conversation between the school and parents depends upon respect for the potential of every family to do better by its children. Patricia Edwards (2004) writes persuasively of *differentiated parenting*, admonishing us not to place all parents into one basket. When we design programs for parents, one size will not fit all. Edwards uses the term *parentally appropriate* to stress the point that "because parents are different, tasks and activities must be compatible with their capabilities" (p. 83). This is not to say that parents' goals for their children vary (they all want their children to succeed in school); their situations, perspectives, and abilities affect their capacity to support their children in particular ways. For example, asking parents to read to their children appears to be a simple request. But some parents have not received, as children themselves, the modeling of how to read interactively with children. Neither might they know just what materials are most appropriate for children to read at any point in time. They also may underestimate the positive effects of talking with their children about what the children have read. These parents, then,

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require different support than parents who might readily respond to the request to "read to your child" because of their own past experience.

The point Edwards makes is more subtle and significant than merely matching the school's request of parents with each parent's ability to respond. The greater point is that parents, like students, are best served when treated individually. This means knowing them, listening to their own stories, understanding what will be most helpful to them in raising their children and supporting their children's school learning. A parent's needs are not static; they change over time with the advancing age of their children. Parent programs require a scope and sequence, differentiation to meet the needs of the parent relative to the age and progress of the child.

Trust and mutual respect cut in both directions; school personnel must operate from a basis of trust in parents, and parents must trust the school. The relationship is circular, of course, since people trust those who trust them and respect those who show them respect. The beginning point lies with the school staff, since it is more manageable to first assure that the limited number of school personnel approach families with a constructive frame of mind than to attempt to change the hearts and minds of all the parents. Does the school countenance idle chatter, often driven by frustration, about parents who "don't care"? Does the principal help teachers look beyond the obstacles of family circumstance to find solutions for children that include clear expectations of, and support for, their parents? Overgeneralization from worst cases can become epidemic in a school, attributing to many families the deficiencies seen in a few families. "You don't understand," the frustrated teacher might say, "we have kids whose parents are on drugs and who let their kids run wild." Yes, every school has its small core of families in which children are drastically short-changed. But that doesn't stop the conversation. What about the other families? And what can we do for that small group of families that are, to use the term arbitrarily applied to them, "dysfunctional"?

The answer is two-fold: We never stop expecting all parents to give their children what they need from home in order to succeed in school, and we find the best possible compensatory measures for the recalcitrant few. The best possible compensatory measures most often include time and attention for these children from caring adults other than their parents—community volunteers in the school, after-

RESPECT

TRUST

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school programs, and participation in youth activities provided by solid organizations such as Boys & Girls Clubs, 4-H, YMCAs, YWCAs, Boy Scouts, and Girl Scouts. Providing these best possible compensatory measures doesn't happen willy-nilly, but by careful matching of each child with the right resource.

While overgeneralization from the worst cases of family dysfunction is one roadblock a school can throw in its own path toward effective connection with families, some schools operate within attendance areas where the prevailing culture insufficiently encourages children's academic success. When a child grows up amidst indolence, violence, immediate gratification, and low regard for civilizing institutions such as the school, the effects are monstrously adverse. When most of the children attending a school come from a neighborhood steeped in a culture of dissipation and failure, the effects on the school are profoundly burdensome. In such situations, the school must provide a cultural counterweight for children and not reflect or permit the self-destructive behaviors that may prevail outside its doors. Typically, the school is the island of hope in these seas of despair. The school is also a source of positive influence on the culture that surrounds it, and its positive influences are extended family by family for the sake of each child. Even here, each parent deserves the expectation that he or she will rise to the task, and the task must be made clear. The task for the parent is to provide the child with a curriculum of the home. Again, while consistently expecting the best of each parent and supporting their efforts, the school simultaneously seeks compensatory experiences for the child. No compensatory experience is more important than a relationship with a caring adult who shows the child the route to success, the way out of the culture of despair and irresponsibility. Resilient children defy the negative outcomes their circumstances predict. Resilient families stand apart from the destructive pressures of the culture that surrounds them. Resilient neighborhoods reverse the habits of failure that previously defined them. The school has a missionary capacity to produce resilient children, resilient families, and resilient neighborhoods.

Expectations and behaviors are the cultural and familial presses that bear upon children. Expectations and behaviors are inextricably webbed; parents express their expectations for their children not only in their words but in their actions. Schools express their expectations for their students and their students' parents through what they profess and in the way they operate.

What, then, do we expect of all parents so that each child receives the support from home necessary to success in school? We expect parents to provide the curriculum of the home, and we must be clear about our expectations, revisiting them often, communicating about them, educating parents about them, and centering our associations upon them. The curriculum of the home is as specific and tangible as the curriculum of the school, based on its own standards. Research on the curriculum of the home (e.g., Bloom, 1964, 1981; Marjoribanks, 1979; Walberg, 1984) provides a description of family practices that link to school performance. Those family practices include aspects of the parent-child relationship, the routines of family life, and family expectations and supervision.

The Parent-Child Relationship

A parent-child relationship most conducive to children's school learning is based on a bond of love, demonstrated through expressions of affection that give the child a sense of worth, security, and support. The verbal exchanges between parent and child contribute to the child's developing facility with language, vocabulary, and interest in words and ideas. When parents converse with their children about daily events, in personal and sustained conversation, the child grows in his or her ability to analyze, to express, and to listen. The child's interest in the broader world is stimulated, and the parent maintains a close awareness of what is going on in the child's life—at school, with friends, and in the child's interpretation of his place in the world. When parents encourage children to use new words and to enjoy the play of words, they keep alive the child's natural inclination to expand her vocabulary and gain power through verbal expression. Family discussion of books, newspapers, magazines, television programs, and other language-laden media also encourage both language development and richer associations with a multitude of topics. Finally, families that make visits to libraries, museums, zoos, historical sites, and cultural events demonstrate the value and excitement of learning to their children and associate this learning with family togetherness.

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The Routine of Family Life

Children thrive when their parents provide them with the security and discipline of a daily routine, the boundaries of expected times for eating, sleeping, playing, working, studying, and reading. Family activities centered around hobbies, games, and other activities that require collective engagement, thinking, and verbal exchange bolster children's ability to concentrate, to explore, to find pleasure in mutual endeavor. School-age children need a quiet place to study and read and the discipline to place a priority on these activities. A formal study time in the home, regardless of the assignments sent home by teachers, not only forms the habit of daily study, but also establishes learning as a family value.

Family Expectations and Supervision

From the example and expectations of their parents, children learn to do their best whatever the task, to honor the importance of punctuality, and to give schoolwork priority over other activities. The parents' encouragement to use correct, effective, and appropriate language forms a child's readiness for the language-rich environment of the school. When parents monitor their children's use of time, the quality of their televiewing, their use of computer games and the internet, and their associations with peers, children learn to place proper value on competing interests. Parental knowledge of their children's progress in school and their personal growth, gained in part from close communication with teachers, helps emphasize the importance of learning and provides parents with the information necessary to make the best decisions about their children's schooling.

These descriptions of family life may sound idealistic, like cliché vignettes of the perfect family. In fact, they are. They also describe the home environments that all children find beneficial to their school success, and therefore, they are worth pursuing. Only with an eye to the ideal can we guide parents toward improved support for their children's learning, a goal that all parents share. The components of the curriculum of the home are within the reach of nearly every family, although some families' situations require more discipline and effort from them than do others. In a single-parent home, the children's needs remain the same, but one parent must assume the responsibilities otherwise shared by two. In a large family, each child needs all that the curriculum of the home entails, but the parents

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must spread their attention across a nest full of hungry beaks. In the clutch of poverty, parents must be assured that what their children need most they are still able to provide. When the language of school is not the language of home, parents may still affirm that words matter, stories convey meaning, and books open doors to all worlds.

In listing the components of the curriculum of the home, the behavioral correlates with school learning, it is easy to miss the underlying potency of what a family provides that cannot be found elsewhere. Habits and values are formed in the home because they are attached to the fibers of loving relationships; the bonds of attachment make the particulars of behavior fecund. The school cannot substitute for the powerful potentiality of the family; it can only encourage the family to apply its advantages to the benefit of the child.

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Effective Parent/ Family Programs

An effective parent/family program is one that helps parents provide the curriculum of the home. Henderson and Berla (1994) advise that successful parent programs must be: 1) **comprehensive** (reaching all families, not just those most easily engaged, and involving parents in a variety of roles), 2) **well-planned** (with specific goals and clear communication of what is expected of all parties), and 3) **long-lasting** (as opposed to the typical, short-term project). Epstein's (1995) typology of family involvement in children's education has become the standard of the field and appears in various adaptations, including the National Standards for Parent Involvement set forth by the PTA. A comprehensive family-school partnership (which Epstein defines as an ongoing relationship rather than a program or event) would address all six types of family involvement. Epstein's six types of parent engagement are:

- **Parenting** (helping families provide their children the necessary care, safety, affection, discipline, and guidance)
- **Communicating** (maintaining a variety of effective, two-way communications between school and home about the school programs, the school's expectations of parents, and children's progress)
- **Volunteering** (providing and encouraging opportunities for parents to help out at school and with school activities)
- **Learning at Home** (providing information and support for parents to monitor homework, provide family learning activities, and encourage reading habits at home)
- **Decision Making** (including parents in school decisions, especially those that most directly affect families, and developing parent leaders and representatives)
- **Collaborating with the Community** (bringing community resources to the service of the school)

Early childhood programs that teach parents to work with their children at home have proven effective in preparing the children for school (Baker, Piotrkowski, & Brooks-Gunn, 1998; Mathematica, 2001; Starkey & Klein, 2000). For school-age children, comprehensive efforts to engage parents at

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>
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> 2) well-planned
> 3) long-lasting

Effective Parent/Family Programs

various points and in different ways seem most productive (Gordon, 1979; Swap, 1993). A 2002 study by Westat and Policy Studies Associates for the U.S. Department of Education considered student achievement in 71 Title I elementary schools. The study looked at the connection between the school's practices of outreach to parents and improvement in reading and math by low-performing students. The relationship between outreach to parents and student learning gains was the strongest of all the variables considered in the study. Outreach was measured along three scales:

- Meeting face-to-face;
- Sending materials on ways to help their child at home; and
- Telephoning both routinely and when their child was having problems.

The three points distilled from Henderson and Mapp (2002) provide the most concise set of linchpins to successful school-home relationships:

- Build a foundation of trust and respect;
- Make direct connections to children's learning; and
- Reach out to parents in their homes and communities.

Elaborating on these points provides the fundamentals of program design for effective, school-based, family and parent initiatives. It is also important to reiterate that the reason schools should take steps to engage parents is so the school's own effectiveness is improved; children learn best when they benefit from good teaching *and a* supportive home environment. It behooves schools to:

- **Provide parents with clear, consistent expectations**, information and guidance to help them practice specific family behaviors (the curriculum of the home) that enhance children's school learning;
- **Maintain convenient channels of two-way communication** between parents and teachers;
- **Bring parents together** on occasion to encourage their sharing of norms, standards, and child-rearing experiences;
- **Provide parents with educational programs** to build their capacity to maintain a strong curriculum of the home; and
- **Provide teachers with professional development** and consistent policies to build their capacity to work with parents and to reinforce the school's clear expectations of parents.

Purpose

Borrowing from business management concepts for defining, articulating, and focusing an organization's activities on its essential purpose, schools have commonly created statements of vision, mission, and purpose. That is a useful exercise, but too often the statements are generic and insufficiently attached to practices. The Mega System, through the decision-making structures described in Chapter 2, provides avenues to align practices with purpose. Extending the definition of school community to include the families of students, we need particular links between purpose and practice to assist the school community in engaging parents and making them full partners.

The School Community Council is the structure suggested within the Mega System to give focused attention to the area of overlapping responsibility between the home and the school within a community of the two. The School Community Council (SCC) provides a venue for shared leadership and articulation of policies and practices relative to families consistent with the school community's purpose. Especially, the SCC attends to the areas in which the school and home most commonly interface. The SCC also assists parents in understanding and providing the curriculum of the home, and it provides ways to supplement the curriculum of the home for children whose parents do not provide the parent-child relationships, routine of family life, and supervision and expectation that all children need.

To make the SCC an effective body, it needs its own constitution, by-laws, and official status within the school's system of governance. To be productive, the SCC also needs a scope of work and specific duties to perform. Additionally, its members must be trained in the research and best practices of parenting, parent programs, and team functioning. Above all, the SCC must be respected through the active participation of the principal and the serious application of its directives.

The SCC is ideally suited to outline the roles of parents, teachers, and students in a School Community Compact, a document commonly found in schools and often inadequately applied. The Compact is useful when it is the subject of discussion among students, teachers, and parents, and when they are challenged to meet its expectations. Similarly, learning standards offer concrete support for the school's purpose and guide instruction. Helping parents understand learning

The School Community Council (SCC) provides a venue for shared leadership and articulation of policies and practices relative to families consistent with the school community's purpose.

standards and see their role in supporting their children's mastery of standards is a job the SCC assumes effectively within its scope of work. Likewise, the school's improvement plan is an evolving document that merits wide understanding within the school community. Homework, often the primary interface between school learning and home activity, requires school-wide policies understood by parents as well as teachers and students, with the role of each clearly defined.

Whenever parents meet with school personnel, the school's purpose and its supporting documents can be discussed and reinforced. The supporting documents include the Compact, learning standards, improvement plan, and homework policy. An ongoing conversation between parents and teachers around these documents builds understanding and a sense of common endeavor toward each student's success. The open house and parent-teacher-student conference are typical points of contact between parents and school personnel, and each can be planned to advance an understanding of the school community's purpose, each member's role in that purpose, and the relevance to each child.

Communication

"What we have here is a failure to communicate," said the prison guard in the movie *Cool Hand Luke*. How often do we say the same in schools? Clear communication requires more than the opportunity to communicate, it also requires an agreement on the topics for discussion. Communication between the school and the home includes five essential topics: 1) what parents can expect from the school—its programs, curriculum, activities, procedures, and policies; 2) what the school can expect from parents—the curriculum of the home; 3) how the parents' child is progressing; 4) how the school can help the parents; and 5) how the parents can help the school. Typically, schools are good at providing information about their programs and some indication of how the child is progressing. The school probably provides some avenues for two-way communication about these two topics. A greater challenge lies in giving due attention to what the school should expect from parents, how the school can help parents in their role, and how parents can help the school in its role. Also, most schools need to work hard at creating opportunities for true communication, conversation, between parents and school personnel, and between parents and other parents. This requires outreach to parents, and it requires careful linkage between parent-child interactions and school learning.

Because opportunity for communication between the home and the school is limited if it only occurs when parents are at the school, the school must find avenues for outreach to the home. Two forms of outreach are especially beneficial: instructional links and home visits. Instructional links are assignments to students that serve three purposes: require parent-child interaction, link to school learning, and educate parents about school learning. They are a special kind of homework. Reading School-Home Links, available from the U. S. Department of Education, provide interactive reading activities aligned to standards from kindergarten through third grade. Similar links are available in other subject areas and other grade levels. School policies and professional development for teachers can encourage teachers to develop their own school-home links, serving the three purposes of 1) interactivity between parent and child, 2) connection to school learning, and 3) education of parents about school learning.

FORMS OF OUTREACH

Because opportunity for communication between the home and the school is limited if it only occurs when parents are at the school, the school must find avenues for outreach to the home. Two forms of outreach are especially beneficial: instructional links and home visits.

Communication

Home visits and home gatherings are forms of outreach that facilitate two-way communication and circumvent the complaint that some parents don't come to the school. A home visit is when someone representing the school visits a student's home. A home gathering is when parents gather in one parent's home and someone representing the school is included. Home visits may be conducted by teachers or by others—parents, community members, teacher aides—trained for the job. At a home gathering, a teacher is the most effective "official" participant from the school.

For both home visits and home gatherings, good organization is the key. Home visitors are trained and given a purpose for the visit. For example, the homes of primary grade students might be visited in the early summer to talk with parents about the importance of children's reading at home and maybe to give them books for the children to read. Visits might focus on parents of students entering a new school, such as kindergarteners or students entering the first grade of a middle school or high school. The visitor would provide parents with a welcome to the school and orientation materials. Whatever the specific purpose of the visit, the occasion is perfect for giving parents helpful information about the school, particularly to inform them of programs for parents. A packet with a welcoming letter from the principal is a nice touch. The visit is conversational, with a "get-to-know-you" feel.

Home gatherings require their own preparation and training for the host parents and the participating teachers. They meet as a group to develop an agenda for the gatherings and to plan the logistics. Each host parent develops a list of invitees. Teachers may suggest to the group parents who would especially benefit from a home gathering, but each host parent must be allowed to select his or her own invitee list. Ground rules are important. The gathering is not a time to discuss particular children or teachers, and the host parent and visiting teacher need to know how to divert conversations that drift in that direction. The home gathering is a good time to talk about the roles of parents and of teachers, in general, in supporting the purpose of the school. The discussion is led by the host parent. The mood is informal, with a handful of parents, a pot of coffee, a few cookies, and an agenda that guides their conversation. Once a round of home gatherings has taken place, the host parents and teachers meet again to discuss their experience.

> Home visits and home gatherings are forms of outreach that facilitate two-way communication and circumvent the complaint that some parents don't come to the school.

Education

The school community is a learning community, and teachers and parents are learners as well as the students. The SCC can plan educational opportunities for teachers to build their skills in working with parents. The SCC can plan parent education programs. Some parent education programs may take the form of the typical "event," with a speaker or group sessions led by other parents or teachers. An especially productive, high-quality parent education program might span two or three meetings of a small group of parents, led by a parent, with a curriculum to study and discuss. Multiple sessions allow the group to jell and parents to get to know each other. Topics for these sessions might be drawn from the curriculum of the home—supporting children's reading habits and study habits at home; encouraging respectful and responsible behavior; or getting pre-schoolers ready for school. A parent course for parents of children with disabilities might help parents support the learning of children with special needs, provide an opportunity for parents to share experiences, and increase parents' understanding of special education. The curriculum contains informational content, opportunities for discussion, and activities to carry out with children between sessions.

Association

Association means face-to-face connection among members of the school community. An association provides a venue for parents to get to know other parents, parents and teachers to get to know each other better, and an opportunity for everyone to strengthen their understanding of the school community's purpose and their role relative to it. Some associations include students. Within a school community, an association is a way to bridge divisions among students; older students reading with younger students, for example. An association may bring volunteer parents and community members to the school to work with individual students or small groups of students. An association may be a common experience, an event shared by all students, possibly one including parents such as a Family Night. Family Reading Nights are a typical common experience that gathers students, parents, and teachers for an evening focused on reading. Similar events can be planned for other subject and interest areas, filled with interactive, parent-child activities. In essence, an association brings together members of the school community to focus on a topic consistent with the school's purpose.

Chapter Summary

This chapter has outlined ways to connect members of the school community to one another to promote the purposes of the school community. The School Community Council is a vehicle for giving special attention to these connections, planning them and providing them. The School Community Council is an official component in the school's governance structure, with its own constitution and by-laws to define its purpose and means of operation. The School Community Council consists of the principal, parents, and key personnel, such as a teacher representative, counselor, and parent liaison. The majority of members should be parents. This chapter also reviewed the curriculum of the home, the important parent-child interactions and family routines that support school learning. Key documents that express the purpose of the school—Compact, school improvement plan, learning standards, and homework policy—are central to the ongoing conversation between parents and other parents, and between parents and school personnel. These conversations build a sense of community around the purposes of the school. The SCC provides one means of shared leadership in the school community, and communication, education, and association are categories of connection around which the SCC's activities may be organized.

Putting Connection Components in Place

The forms on the following page may be used to assess the current status of key elements of connection and to plan for the development of the missing pieces. A Leadership Team can work through these forms, develop a plan of action, and monitor the progress. For items checked "No" on the assessment of the current situation, primary responsibility is assigned to a person or team, with an expected date for completion of the task.

Connection Indicators

Assessing the Current Situation		Adding the Missing Pieces	
Yes	No	Primary Responsibility	Target Date for Completion

A. Purpose

B. Communication

C. Education

D. Association

1. The school provides "intragenerational associations" in which students of different ages are brought together to learn.

2. The school provides "intergenerational associations" in which parents or community volunteers assist in the classroom.

3. The school provides opportunities for parents to get to know each other and discuss the curriculum of the home.

4. The school's policies encourage parents to visit classrooms.

5. The school has a friendly document that outlines the ground rules for parent visits to classrooms.

Connection Indicators

A. Purpose	
1. The school's mission statement is distinct, clear, and focused on student learning.	
2. The school's Compact outlines the responsibilities/expectations of teachers, parents, and students.	
3. The school's Compact includes responsibilities/expectations of parents drawn from the curriculum of the home.	
4. The school's Compact is annually distributed to teachers, school personnel, parents, and students.	
5. The school's homework policy provides guidelines for amount of daily study time at home by grade level.	
6. The school's homework policy requires homework at all grade levels.	
7. The school's homework policy makes homework a part of the student's report card grade.	
8. The school's homework policy stresses the importance of checking, marking, and promptly returning homework.	
9. The school's mission statement, Compact, and homework policy are included in the school improvement plan.	
10. The school celebrates its accomplishments.	
11. The school recognizes the individual accomplishments of teachers.	
12. The school recognizes the accomplishments of teams.	

	Assessing the Current Situation		Adding the Missing Pieces	
	Yes	No	Primary Responsibility	Target Date for Completion

Connection Indicators

B. Communication	
1. The school's Compact, homework policy, and learning standards are routinely reviewed and discussed at faculty meetings.	
2. The school's Compact, homework policy, and learning standards are routinely reviewed and discussed at open houses and parent-teacher conferences.	
3. Parent-teacher conferences are held at least twice a year and include students at least once a year.	
4. The school regularly and clearly communicates with parents about its expectations of them and the importance of the curriculum of the home.	
5. The "ongoing conversation" between school personnel and teachers is candid, supportive, and flows in both directions.	
6. The school maintains a program of home visits by teachers, staff, and/or trained community members.	
7. Teachers regularly make "interactive" assignments that encourage parent-child interaction relative to school learning.	
8. The school maintains a program of home gatherings, with groups of parents meeting in a home with a teacher.	
9. Teachers are familiar with the curriculum of the home and discuss it with parents.	
10. Parents are familiar with the curriculum of the home and discuss it with teachers.	

	Assessing the Current Situation		Adding the Missing Pieces	
	Yes	No	Primary Responsibility	Target Date for Completion

Connection Indicators

C. Education	
1. The school offers parent education programs focused on building skills relative to the curriculum of the home.	
2. Parent education programs are led by trained parent leaders.	
3. Parent education programs include some multi-session group experiences with specific agendas or curricula.	
4. Professional development programs for teachers include assistance in working effectively with parents.	

D. Association	
1. The school provides "intragenerational associations" in which students of different ages are brought together to learn.	
2. The school provides "intergenerational associations" in which parents or community volunteers assist in the classroom.	
3. The school provides opportunities for parents to get to know each other and discuss the curriculum of the home.	
4. The school's policies encourage parents to visit classrooms.	
5. The school has a friendly document that outlines the ground rules for parent visits to classrooms.	
6. The school sponsors all-school events that include parents, students, and teachers and focus on aspects of student learning.	
7. All-school events include parent-child interactive activities.	
8. Office and support staff are trained to make the school a "welcoming place" for parents.	

	Assessing the Current Situation		Adding the Missing Pieces	
	Yes	No	Primary Responsibility	Target Date for Completion

	Assessing the Current Situation		Adding the Missing Pieces	
	Yes	No	Primary Responsibility	Target Date for Completion

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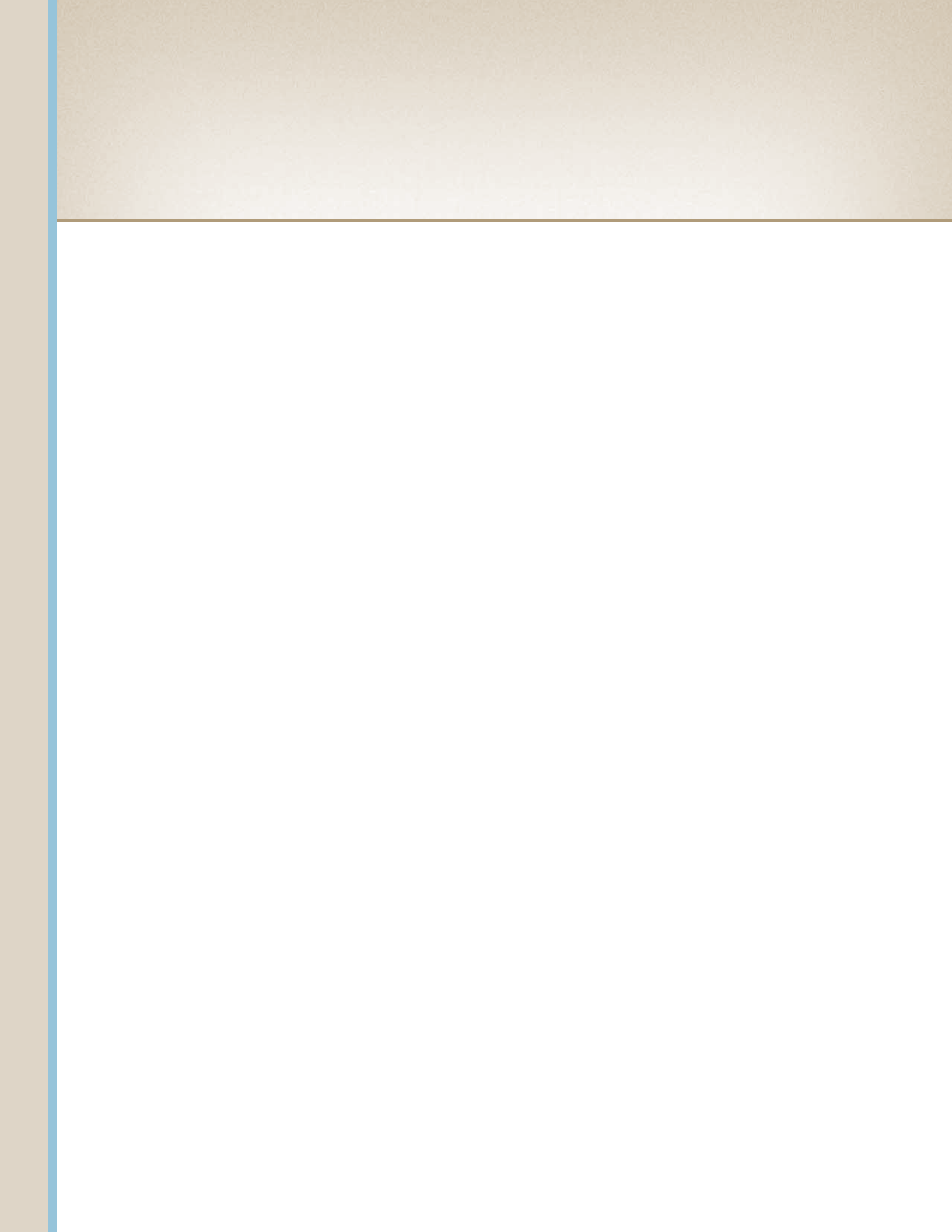
This handbook portrays the school as a system with many parts
to be continuously engineered to precision by the community of people
who have every reason to provide the best possible education
for the children in their midst.