Origins of the School as a Community

The notion of the community of the school originates in part from 19th and 20th century concerns for how the rise of industrialism, bureaucracy, and capitalism produced feelings of isolation and a lack of social attachments beyond the immediate family; these concerns led many to encourage greater voluntary participation in communities beyond the family structure (Lasch, 1991). Coleman (1987) and others also noted declines in civic engagement and trust in government and suggested that communities could help supply social capital for children—“the norms, the social networks, and the relationships between adults and children that are of value for the child’s growing up” (p. 36). Social capital contributes to success in school and in life, and modern schools are expected to supply it in part by creating supportive school communities. The school community is often described as: (a) inclusive of families of students and some aspects of community beyond the school doors, and (b) operating on the basis of shared values, trust, expectation, and obligations rather than tasks, rules, and hierarchies (Cobb, 1992).

Families and Schools and the Importance of the Curriculum of the Home

Family–school relationships and parent involvement form the foundation for strong school communities. Families strongly impact learning, and home and community influences are among the strongest contributors to academic attainment (Wang, Haertel, & Walberg, 1993; Walberg, 1984). Walberg (1984) and others (e.g., Epstein, 1987) suggest that schools take the lead in promoting parent/family involvement, as well as in developing family–school partnerships. Schools’ parent involvement initiatives may include teaching parents to put into practice parts of family life that reinforce school learning, referred to as the “curriculum of the home.” This curriculum involves teaching parents to create home environments that will help their children form habits and develop attitudes that will prepare them for academic learning that will be sustained throughout the years of schooling. This curriculum may include reading (including parent–child discussions of reading), parent–child conversations about school and everyday events, teaching children to strive for long-term goals and defer immediate gratification, and expressions of affection and interest in children’s academic and personal growth. Some parents of course will provide these home environments naturally, while others can benefit from communications and supports from the school to develop the kind of home environments that best support school learning.

Building Community in Schools

A school community includes the people intimately attached to the school (teachers, staff, students, and families) sharing goals for the academic and social learning of children and communicating and associating with one another in the pursuit of their shared educational goals (Redding, 1990, 1996). An effective school community can draw parents into greater contact with each other and provide benefits such as (a) children are known by, cared for, and watched out for by a larger number of adults, and (b) parents of a group of children maintain communication among themselves, sharing standards, norms, and experiences of childrearing. Effective school communities further include shared school-level decision making by designing structures and processes that include the “right people in the right decisions,” ensure representation across the school (parents, teachers and staff, administrators, and students), and foster a sense of ownership for every group within the school.
School communities also benefit from the sharing of common experiences through the use of schoolwide rituals and traditions that are created based on shared educational values and themes. For example, at one school every student learns the principles of debate, enters into debates with peers, and eventually the winners compete against parents in an all-school assembly, with students and parents switching roles and arguing the side that the other would usually take on typical areas of family disagreement such as bedtime hours. Common experiences to build the school community may also include schoolwide policies (e.g., “At our school, everyone drops everything to read a book at 10:00 am daily”), events (e.g., “At our school all students, staff, and parents participate in Courtesy Week”), instructional strategies (e.g., “At our school all teachers use cooperative learning strategies weekly to bring students together”), and curricular threads (e.g., “At our school all students progress through a common math curriculum, moving at individual paces determined by their mastery”).

Action Principles: Parents/Families
1. Learn about the curriculum of the home and try one or two new practices at home.
2. Take advantage of family nights and other common experiences at your child’s school to get to know the teachers and other parents.

Action Principles: Teachers
1. Recognize the importance of family efforts at home (even by those families who rarely come to the school), and respectfully encourage the curriculum of the home.
2. Participate in common experiences at the school, using them as an opportunity to get to know families and to introduce them to one another.

Action Principles: Schools
1. Take stock of how your school functions as a community by gathering data through surveys and/or focus groups of teachers, school leaders, parents, and students. See: http://www.schoolcommunitynetwork.org/schoolcommunityindex.html for a survey example.
2. Identify a school team or teams (parents, teachers, students) who can use this information to identify ways to get parents more involved, communicate the importance of the curriculum of the home, and develop ideas for creating common experiences within the school community.

Action Principles: Districts
1. Review available information for each school regarding the extent to which its climate is conducive to creating and sustaining an effective school community.
2. Identify any schools that have created effective school communities and maintain high levels of family involvement. Share best practices among the district schools and host forums for schools to share their effective practices with other similar schools.
3. Identify and provide research-based family engagement training programs and monitor their impact on school communities.

References