

Answering the Perplexities of Parent Involvement

Franklin Bradley

Getting African American and Hispanic parents involved in education requires answering what Bre Peeler Sanders calls the “perplexities”—the critical questions educators must answer to involve parents in schools. Sanders said that means bridging communication gaps and resolving interrelated issues that can confound educators.

Her crowded conference session, *Lessons Learned: Actively Engaging African American and Hispanic Parents*, was interesting and lively. Audience members laughed with Sanders as she recalled her adventures and missteps as a parent liaison at Riverside Intermediate School, an Atlanta-area school where 65 percent of the students are African American and 30 percent are Hispanic.

Sanders started her efforts to increase parent engagement by randomly selecting families to survey about their involvement in the school. Many of the parents were hard to contact because they worked multiple jobs with long hours. Sanders explained, “When they work three jobs, you’re not going to see them in the classroom. And the catch-22 is that if you do see them, it’s because they lost a job.”

Sanders found it was important to reach out to parents in their homes. When she was able to make contact, she discovered many obstacles to parent involvement. Parents cited lack of time, single parenthood, undocumented citizenship status, and language barriers, among other factors.

Often more important, however, was a disconnect in defining exactly what constitutes successful parental involvement. Teachers felt that involved parents should volunteer in the schools. However, when Sanders asked African American parents what they felt their responsibilities were as parents, they said their role was to support school efforts and discipline their children. Hispanic parents believed their role was to help with homework. So when Sanders asked

these parents why they weren’t involved at school, most of them were offended.

An understanding of these different definitions helped bridge that gap, but it didn’t immediately get parents any more involved. After trying several unsuccessful involvement strategies, Sanders finally discovered a variety of successful approaches for engaging parents at Riverside—exhibiting positive attitudes; establishing personal relationships; providing interpreters; fostering a sense of belonging; and offering transportation, food, and child care at meetings all proved helpful.

Individually, each of these solutions addressed a specific need; together, they resolved a set of interrelated problems that stifled parental involvement at the school. Many of these strategies, such as positive attitudes and personal relationships, had to be implemented by educators throughout the school to succeed. Teachers and administrators were glad to make these changes because they were in response to parents’ needs.

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