SUSTAINING READING FIRST

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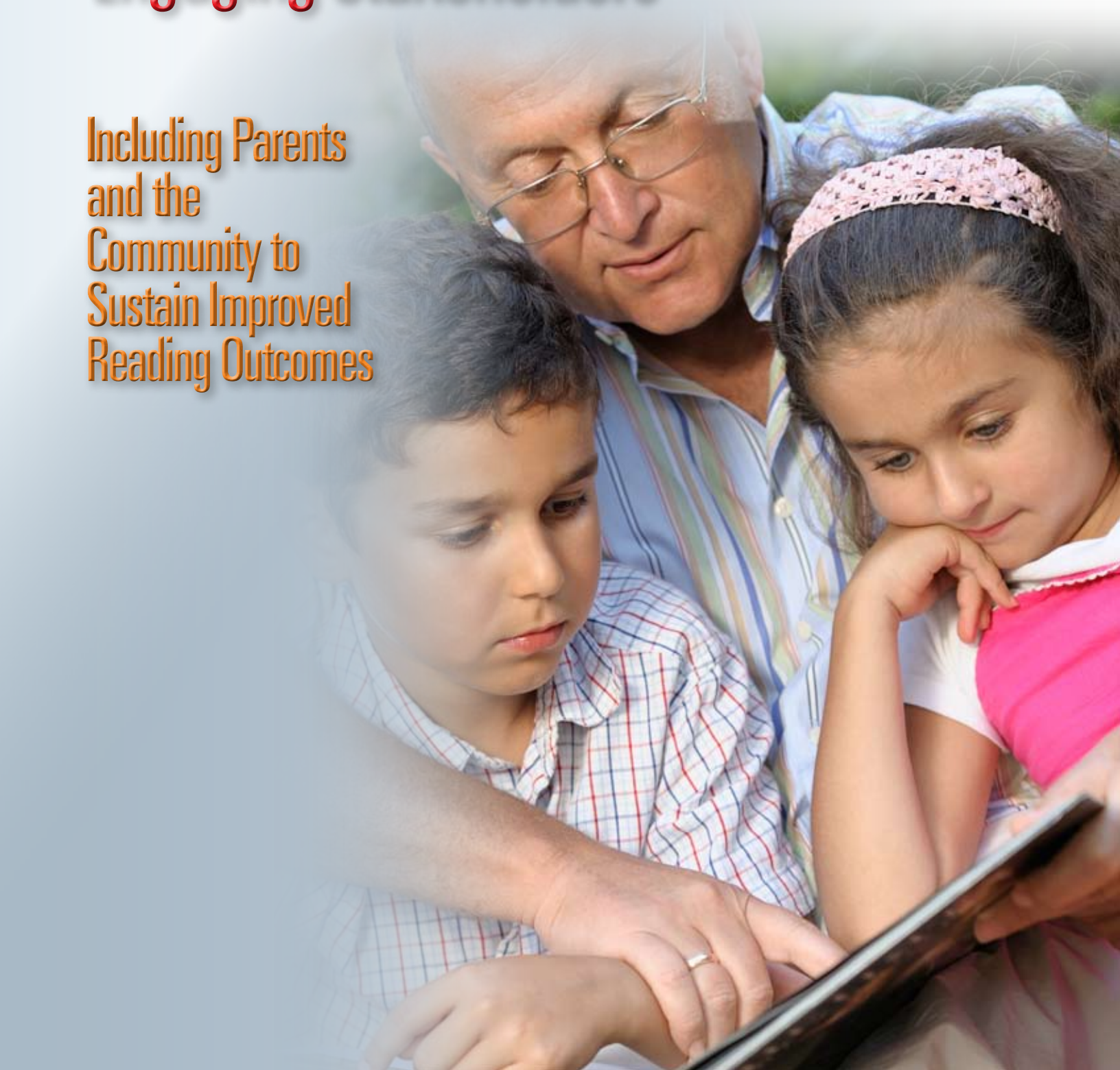
Engaging Stakeholders

Including Parents and the Community to Sustain Improved Reading Outcomes



Welcome

Sustainability Series Number 6

Including Parents and the Community to Sustain Improved Reading Outcomes

Schools seeking improved outcomes usually have one or more "champions for change" on the inside of the organization, and these leaders can often engage other staff to produce better results in the short term. But these instructional leaders often move to another school, climb the career ladder, or retire. When they do, gains that have been made often quickly fade away. If schools are going to build support for on-going success, they also need advocates for improved program outcomes outside the immediate organization—constituents who understand the mission of the school, who share the champions' vision and passion for student success, and who have a personal stake in the performance of the school and its students. In this brief, we identify schools' external stakeholders and offer ways in which these constituents can be a positive force for helping school staff achieve improved outcomes for all students and sustain them over time.

This brief, sixth in a series addressing key aspects of sustainability, can help leaders in your school, district, or state plan for active parent and community involvement and sustain the success they have established through the Reading First initiative. Other aspects of sustaining school-wide reading models that are based on scientific research will be addressed in other briefs in this series. Please check the Reading First Sustainability website at http://www.ed.gov/programs/readingfirst/support/sustaining.html for other titles in this series.

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Sustainability is the ability of a staff to maintain the core beliefs and values (culture) of a program and use them to guide program adaptations over time while maintaining improved or enhanced outcomes.

-adapted from Century and Levy, 2002

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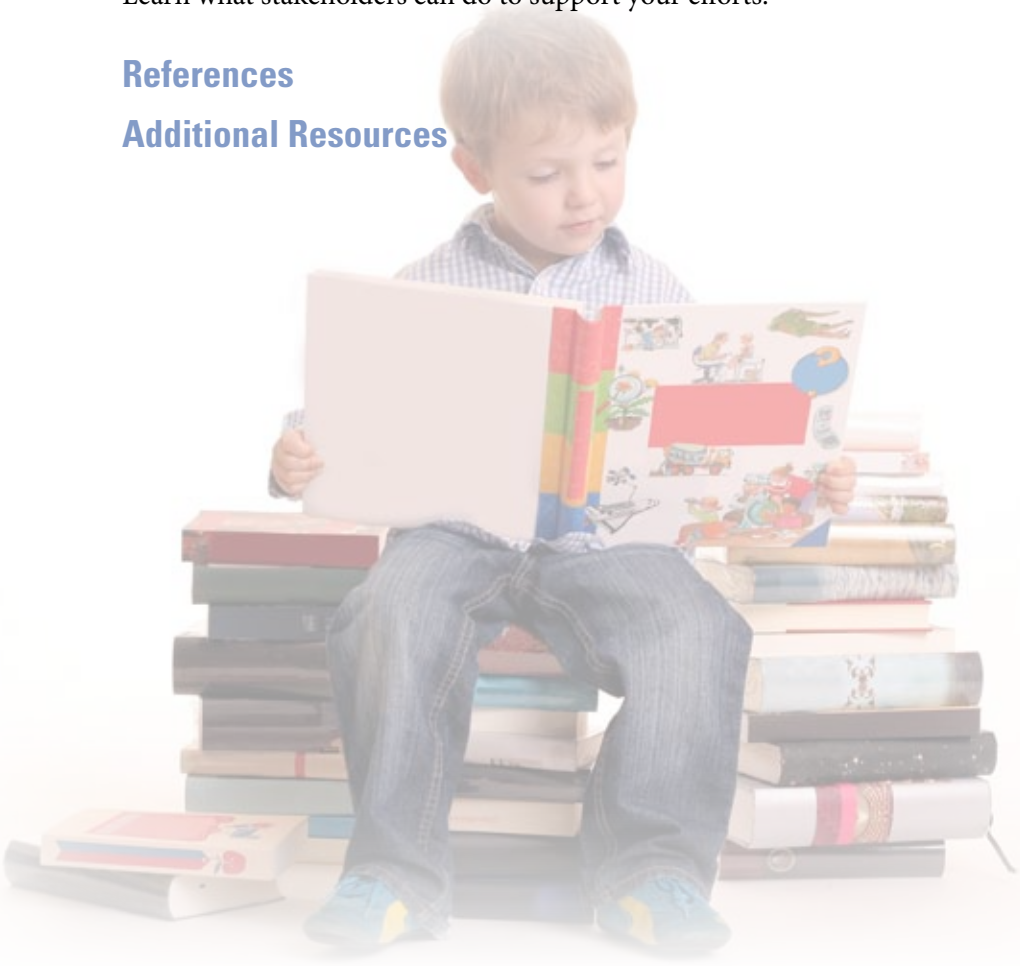

"Effective programs to engage families and communities embrace a philosophy of partnership. The responsibility for children's educational development is a collaborative enterprise among parents, school staff, and community members."

Henderson and Mapp, 2002

Stakeholders and Sustained Outcomes

Who are the stakeholders?

A stakeholder is an individual or group with an interest in the success of an organization in fulfilling its mission—delivering intended results and maintaining the viability of its products, services and outcomes over time.

Who are the stakeholders in the endeavor to improve student outcomes in reading and to sustain those increased levels of achievement? To whom does it matter that more students learn to read well and to succeed in school—and that improved outcomes hold up over time? Table 1 identifies key constituencies in the realm of reading outcomes and suggests what members of each group have at stake. Keep in mind that some "stakes," of course, are held by more than one constituent group.

Table 1: Key Educational Constituent Groups and their "Stake" in Students' Reading Success

Constituent Groups	What's at Stake?
Students	Personal success throughout school, future opportunity
Parents	Pride, success, and opportunity for the students they care about
School staff	Professional efficacy and job satisfaction
School & district staff	"Adequate yearly progress," meeting accountability expectations
School board	Fulfilling the district's mission, media coverage, accountability
Taxpayers	Getting a good return on their tax "investment" in schools
Business community	Ability to hire graduates with skills needed, community economics
Other community members	Community pride and "livability," real estate values

Internal and External Stakeholders

- **Internal stakeholders** are those who work within the school system on a daily basis and who largely control what goes on there. They include school staff, district staff, and, to some extent, school boards.
- **External stakeholders** are those outside the day-to-day work of the schools who have a strong interest in school outcomes but who do not directly determine what goes into producing those outcomes.

Why involve stakeholders?

The distinction between internal and external education stakeholders is important. With respect to a school improvement effort, such as a schoolwide reading model, internal stakeholders clearly have greater capacity to produce positive change in schools, but they don't have all of the power needed to sustain it.

Because of factors that can affect organizational performance over time (such as staff attrition, shifting priorities and "mission drift"), improved outcomes achieved one year can easily fade the next. For this reason, external stakeholders also have a critical role to play in sustaining improved outcomes. If they are informed of the school's effort to improve reading outcomes, they can help sustain the district's focus over time on "mission-oriented change"—improvement that lies squarely at the heart of the district's mission or purpose—thereby moderating the effects of staff turnover, maintaining reading as the top priority, and eliminating mission drift.

When the long-term success of a school system is deemed important, we must ask: "To whom do the schools belong?" and "Who has a long-term vested interest in the success of our schools and students?" In answering these questions, we quickly find ourselves at the doorstep of our constituents: the families who send their children to our schools, the taxpayers who support the schools, and the businesses who hire our graduates. In this light, external stakeholders can be highly motivated and can become powerful drivers to help achieve and sustain positive change in our schools.

What does it take to engage stakeholders for improved outcomes?

The kind of engagement we are talking about here is different from what both educators and external stakeholders might think of when pondering the notion of parent and community engagement in schools. This is not merely about involvement in social events, fund-raising efforts, or traditional involvement in activities such as parent training, homework assistance, and general volunteering.

We are talking about on-going collaboration focused squarely on what schools are there for—student learning—and about transparent dialog on the need that many schools face to improve student learning. Beginning this dialog does not assure a successful partnership. Here are guidelines for engaging stakeholders:

- The staff must take the lead to provide stakeholders the data and other information they need to be productive partners around student achievement.
- Partnership activities must be directly aligned with student achievement goals.
- Efforts must be collaborative and genuine. There are meaningful roles for each party to play and these must be clearly articulated.
- Information sharing must be transparent. Achievement data must be clear, accurate, and meaningful.
- All parties must operate from common values and a common vision for student achievement.
- All efforts must be mission-oriented and data-driven.

Engaging Stakeholders in Education

To what extent can parent and community involvement impact student success in school? How might traditional involvement of external stakeholders be extended such that these constituents become a force for successfully implementing and sustaining effective schoolwide reading practices?

Historically, parent involvement in education has taken one of three forms:

1. **Parent training** How to be a good parent; how to promote the importance of education to your child; how to talk to your child about important issues.
2. **Parent support** In terms of the school's homework practices and the child's homework efforts (including student independent reading outside of school).
3. **Parent volunteering** Ranging from volunteering in the classroom to helping out with social activities at school (*e.g.*, class parties, school carnivals, field trips,) or with fund-raising activities.

While all of these activities can enhance the academic or social dimensions of a child's school experience and extend what the school can provide, most parent involvement activities remain at a distance from the heart of the elementary school's mission—to impart basic skills and foundational knowledge in preparation for the more advanced learning required in middle school, high school and beyond. The gatekeepers for parent involvement, of course, and those who determine its form and extent are the school staff. It is incumbent upon educators to engage parents and community members in ways that are aligned with critical outcomes and go deeper to impact school outcomes at scale. Let's examine how some educators are reaching out to stakeholders to support the school's mission and to empower school improvement.

Categorizing Types of Engagement and Setting Standards.

Here are just a few of the many organizations that have identified ways that parents and other educational stakeholders can get involved in the work of their local schools.

The National Parent Teacher Association (PTA) has established and promulgated a set of National Standards for Family-School Partnerships (http://www.pta.org/1216.htm), which includes language consistent with efforts both to improve individual student outcomes and to advocate for and support school improvement efforts. The PTA website includes examples of these standards in action and tools for enacting them.

The National Network of Partnership Schools (NNPS) is maintained by Johns Hopkins University. They have identified a list of "Keys to Successful Partnerships" very similar to the PTA's partnership standards, including a focus on decision-making and community collaboration, both of which help schools go deeper in cultivating support for improved outcomes. This work identifies effective partnership practices and articulates a process for implementing them (see Epstein, 1995). The work of NNPS can be found at http://www.csos.jhu.edu/P2000/.

The Parent Information and Resource Centers (PIRC), part of the federal No Child Left Behind Act, consist of a network of centers that "…helps schools, districts and states implement successful …parent involvement policies, programs and activities that lead to improvement in student academic achievement…" A National PIRC Coordination Center provides resources to make connections between schools, families and communities. (See http://www.nationalpirc.org/ for more information.)

The **Annenberg Institute for School Reform** has developed the concept of "smart educational systems," a type of school-home-community partnership which provides a "comprehensive web of learning support" for students. The Annenberg staff believe that "schools alone cannot ensure that all students have the resources and support they need to [achieve]. Districts, in partnership with community agencies and organizations must help fill this need. The Institute defines smart educational systems as "networks of services provided by schools, city agencies, community organizations, cultural institutions, and business to promote high-quality student learning wherever it occurs—at school, at home, and in the community." While these supports often feature social services, they could also be focused on implementing and sustaining effective programs for increasing student achievement (See http://www.annenberginstitute.org for more information.)

Effects of Parent and Community Involvement

> "Taken as a whole, these studies found a positive and convincing relationship between family involvement and benefits for students, including improved academic achievement. This relationship holds across families of all … backgrounds and for students of all ages."
>
> *Henderson and Mapp, 2002*

Much work has been done over the past quarter century to establish a linkage between parent involvement and children's learning. The National Committee for Citizens in Education (NCCE) summarized the results of nearly 50 studies on this topic and identified one group of studies which focused on building strong relationships between schools, families, and the larger community. The authors concluded that "the degree of parent and community interest in high quality education is the critical factor in the impact of the school environment on the achievement and educational aspirations of students" (NCCE, 1987).

More recently, and more closely linked with our focus here, a review of research done by parent involvement expert Anne Henderson and colleagues established the link between parent involvement and children's learning (Henderson, Jacob, Kernan-Schloss & Raimondo, 2004) and reported an increase in parent and community organizing efforts to improve schools.

Henderson's work also notes that "unlike traditional parent involvement, parent and community organizing [often] holds schools accountable for results," a focus that often leads to "positive changes in policy, practice and resources" (Henderson & Mapp, 2002). Although the focus in these studies was not directly on improving reading achievement, the extension of parent and community organizing to this goal seems a plausible one. When parents and other community members advocate for the kinds of systemic changes that can help sustain improved outcomes (*e.g.*, policies, goals, dedicated funding), schools and districts are more likely to focus on these changes and thereby be able to sustain recent improvements.

Examples of Partnerships

Example 1: Statewide Advocacy by Community Partnerships

A strong example of parents, community members and school leaders who organized to advance student achievement can be found in Kentucky, where the Prichard Committee for Academic Excellence was formed 25 years ago as an independent, non-profit advocacy group "to improve education for all Kentuckians." Through data-sharing, goal-setting, policy recommendations, lobbying, and other advocacy activities—as well as through collaboration with other educational interest groups—the Prichard Committee has been instrumental in raising the profile of education in Kentucky at all levels—from pre-school to graduate school. Recently, the Committee has launched an initiative called "Top 20 by 2020" with a goal "to propel Kentucky schools into the top tier of schools in the nation over the next decade."

Kentucky schools have made significant progress over the past several years, due in part, many Kentuckians would say, to the work of the Prichard Committee. The Committee's affiliate group, the Commonwealth Institute for Parent Leadership, has trained hundreds of parents

and other community leaders to serve as effective advocates for higher student achievement statewide. This model has since been adopted by a number of other states.

The work being done in Kentucky shows that parent and community involvement in the schools need not be adversarial. It can include all interested stakeholders working in collaboration to provide leadership for improved school outcomes. As the Kentucky experience suggests, this requires training for all parties, including school personnel, in how to work collaboratively, including the need to listen carefully, communicate transparently and operate from common values and goals. Where this can be accomplished—and when egos, power concerns and control issues can be kept in check—remarkable progress can be achieved, as can be seen in the Kentucky example.

Example 2: Districtwide Community Partnerships

Work began more than a decade ago to improve student reading outcomes in the Kennewick, Washington school district (Fielding, Kerr & Rossier, 1998, 2007). It began with the school board setting a goal that 90 percent of students would be reading on grade level by the end of third grade. Initially, many people thought that this goal was unrealistic. Now, some ten years later, district elementary schools are meeting this goal with considerable consistency. What fueled this remarkable accomplishment? A large part of it was the school board's initial decision—and its continuing commitment—to set a clear goal for student achievement, to remain steadfast in this goal and in holding district schools accountable for it. Also important were the efforts to provide strong community leadership and clear communication around the goal and to support this priority for more than a decade through allocation of funds for training, staffing, and materials. This is an extraordinary example of mission-driven leadership by the board and its top district administrators, and it provides us with a strong example of what can be accomplished when district leaders and school board members take their charge seriously and remain focused on their top priority over an extended period of time.

But there is also another powerful component at work in the success of the Kennewick district. Early on, district leaders realized the need not only to welcome parents and give them an opportunity to be involved in their child's education, but also to give parents an important role in preparing their children academically for school and thereby help to reduce the readiness gap between children coming to school. This parent role is extremely important to children's success in becoming a reader, but it is surprisingly simple: Read to your child 20 minutes a day. This effort to get parents to read to their young children regularly was formalized by establishing a community reading foundation, and by engaging the community to get the message out to parents. The model which has been highly sucessful, has now spread to a large number of other regions and states.

Example 3: School Level Collaboration with Community

Sharon City, Pennsylvania school district is small in area and in enrollment, but rich in ideas and in its commitment to identify and connect with stakeholders. School leaders have made a concerted effort to get the word out to parents, school board members and community groups about their efforts to improve student achievement. Student successes are made visible within the neighborhood, the school district office, to the school board, and within the community. As a result, the school board members have come to understand what is needed to sustain success and are working to fund reading coaches out of the district budget when Reading First funds expire.

The Sharon City schools have also increased their efforts to reach out to parents. They have launched parent workshops on how to support children's success in school, incorporated similar information into the parent conference process and connected parents with such community resources as the local family center, the county library and ESL programs for adults. In addition, school staff members have recruited several community organizations to commit time and resources to help schools provide a range of supports that target student needs in learning to read. Participating groups include the county Literacy Council, the city Lifelong Learning Council and the city Rotary Club.

Individual schools are the most visible reminders to parents and community members of the importance and presence of the educational mission within the community. Each school has its own constituency, which includes families of currently enrolled children, neighbors, nearby business and other organizations within the community. Each school must identify and reach out to its constituents to inform them of the school's mission, vision and successes and seek their support. They can ask, "Who lives in this neighborhood?", "What stake do they have in the success of our students?" and "How can we engage them in supporting our students and our programs?"

Many schools are in neighborhoods that are low income and have few apparent resources. Where, then, can school staff turn for support? In one Oregon school, staff scanned the neighborhood and saw many elderly people, a fire station and a small financial institution. Some might think that there is not much support to be had from such meager resources. But this school recruited a number of elderly neighbors to form a corps of senior volunteers to tutor children in reading. The firefighters became mentors to many children and collected reading books for them. The financial institution paid for all the materials and training needed to implement a supplemental reading program and even hosted the teacher training sessions in their corporate board room—all because someone asked them if they would help. The school went on to engage the local parks and recreation district, the mayor, and their local U.S. Congressman as partners in supporting their reading program.

Sometimes a school's stakeholders are not immediately apparent. But when we stop to think about it, there are many people who care about the success of children and are willing to support that cause. Helping children learn to read is not a difficult thing to sell—if only we identify the local stakeholders and reach out to them with a compelling message and an opportunity to get on board.

To capture the full potential of stakeholder groups in supporting sustained success of school reading initiatives, parent and community involvement in schools must go beyond social activities and fund-raising efforts to address student achievement head-on, and school staff must lead this effort. When schools, districts, parents and community groups collaborate and align their efforts around student achievement, more students will succeed, success can be sustained, and public education will be at its best.

How can stakeholders help sustain reading outcomes?

> "Society has a stake in the well-being of children down the block …Whether or not kids eat well, are nurtured and have a roof over their heads (and are well-educated) is not just a consequence of how their parents (provide for them). It is also a responsibility of society…."
>
> *Richard B. Stolley (1995), U.S. editor and child advocate.*

How can we engage our external stakeholders in the challenge of improving student reading outcomes? What messages do we want to give them? What do we want to ask of them by way of support for our students and our efforts? What efforts on their part will help us sustain an effective school-wide reading model over time?

Stakeholders can begin by asking school boards and district leaders whether the community is realizing a strong educational return on tax dollars invested: "Are our schools accomplishing what we, as a community, expect and need them to accomplish?" This role need not be adversarial; if managed well, it can be seen simply as a steady presence capable of helping to sustain the focus on the school's primary mission and seeking ways to help accomplish that purpose. Constituents can be seen as important partners who are there to help push the mission and to help pull the load.

What do we want stakeholders to know?

There are a few things about efforts to improve reading instruction that non-educators would benefit from knowing—and which we would benefit from sharing with them. Knowing these things would enable them to better support our work. These "to knows" include:

- what we hold as our mission (our purpose as a school), our beliefs about teaching and learning and our vision for student success;
- what levels of performance we have established as our expectations and benchmarks by grade level;
- how our students are doing in reading compared to benchmarks and goals;
- a few key ideas related to reading instruction (*e.g.*, differentiation, urgency); and
- a few key ideas related to reading assessment (*e.g.*, outcome and progress monitoring measures).

From the beginning, school leaders must take the initiative in forming strong partnerships. This begins with identifying what we want constituents to know about our work (see list on the previous page) and our results to date and articulating what they can do to achieve and sustain improved results.

Schools exist to serve the educational needs of the community. A community's schools are at their best when they are sharply focused on specific, mission-oriented outcomes, such as empowering all students to become successful readers, and when they are consistently successful in delivering on the mission. The community itself is at its best when its stakeholders know how the schools are performing and when they advocate for and collaboratively support improved outcomes.

Educators know a great deal about "what works," but they can't bring about or sustain improvement on their own. Parents and community members must have a strong vested interest in the success of the schools and must co-own the outcomes produced. What is needed now is for schools to identify and actively engage all stakeholders in fulfilling the mission and enacting the vision of all students succeeding in school, starting with success in reading.

What do we want stakeholders to do?

As illustrated by the examples and sources cited above, external stakeholders can do a number of things to support schools' efforts to increase student achievement. Stakeholders in all roles can make important contributions.

Parents can . . .

- read to their young children at home;
- learn the key information to know about supporting the school's effort to improve student reading outcomes;
- follow the progress of their own children and of the school as a whole, talking with teachers and school leaders about how the parent can help when results fall short of goals; and
- advocate at the school, district, and state levels for systems supports which will help produce and sustain improved results.

Community citizens and business leaders can . . .

- learn the key information to know about supporting the school's effort to improve student reading outcomes;
- collaborate with school leaders to identify the variables they can influence which can make a difference in student outcomes;
- advocate at the community and state levels for systems supports—policies, priorities, training, and resources which will support improved outcomes; and
- support and promote the improvement agenda of the schools and district.

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The Prichard Committee for Academic Excellence, Top 20 by 2020 Initiative. Downloaded January 18, 2009 from http://www.prichardcommittee.org/Top20by2020/tabid/45541/Default.aspx

Additional Resources

- The Annenberg Institute for School Reform (http://www.annenberginstitute.org/)
- The Center for Parent Leadership (CPL (http://www.prichardcommittee.org/CPL/tabid/31492/Default.aspx)
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- National Network of Partnership Schools (http://www.csos.jhu.edu/P2000/)
- National Parent Teachers Association (http://www.pta.org/)
- National Reading Foundation (http://www.readingfoundation.org/)
- Parent Information and Resource Centers (http://www.nationalpirc.org/)
- The Prichard Committee for Academic Excellence (http://www.prichardcommittee.org/)

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