
Building Strong School Cultures: A Guide to Leading Change¹
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Study Guide²

This study guide is designed as an easy reference to the key ideas and themes in each chapter of the book as well as to explicitly link ideas to practical applications for leaders in school settings. This guide offers the reader of *Building Strong School Cultures* materials to enhance understanding and to support group discussion and individual reflection about the ideas in the book.

¹ Kruse, S. D. & Louis, K. S. (2009). *Building Strong School Cultures: A Guide to Leading Change*. Thousand Oaks CA: Corwin Press.

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Chapter 7

Building alliances and expanding your professional networks has been the theme of Chapter 5 and 7. Engaging the broader community can also enhance your school's cultural resources, but most school leaders agree that this is an area where they have not been as successful as they would like. This chapter focuses on how to work with other important groups and individuals that affect your school.

Key Themes:

The most obvious partners for schools to engage with are parents. We focus on viewing parents as important collaborators in the educational process and suggest potential benefits for schools who capitalize on the resources parents bring to the culture of the school.

Establishing relationships with parents. One of the major pioneers in this area is Joyce Epstein. Since the 1980s, her work has emphasized the importance of investigating and building on overlapping spheres of influence of families and schools on students' learning and development and on family and school effectiveness. One of her major contributions has been to move beyond parent conferences and back-to-school nights, emphasizing six different ways in which parents and schools can complement each other. These include:

- *Parenting*: Helping all families establish supportive home environments for children;
- *Communicating*: Establishing two-way exchanges about school programs and children's progress;

- *Volunteering*: Recruiting and organizing parent help at school, home, or other locations;
- *Learning at home*: Providing information and ideas to families about how to help students with homework and other curriculum-related materials;
- *Decision-making*: Having parents from all backgrounds serve as representatives and leaders in school committees; and
- *Collaborating with the community*: Identifying and integrating resources and services from the community to strengthen school programs.

Engaging parents has always been easier in elementary schools than in upper grade levels, and Epstein's work has focused on engaging families with younger children. The work of Sandra Christensen, however, expands the array of tested programs to include upper grade students as well. While her "Check & Connect" initiative is featured on the federal government's "What Works" website as a dropout prevention program (see resource section for more information), Christensen and her colleagues advocate a much broader strategy to engage families, community service providers, and schools in supporting individual students who have fragile connections to school. The programs that they have designed have resulted in: decreased truancy, decreased dropout rates, increased accrual of credits, increased school completion, and has had a positive impact on literacy.

The main emphasis of Check & Connect is on consistent identification of students who may be temporarily in need of support (checking), and the development of communication systems, steered from a base in the school, that keep all relevant adults in the loop (connecting). Christenson's program includes the following elements:

- *Relationship Building*: Mutual trust and open communication, nurtured through a long-term commitment focused on students' educational success.
- *Routine Monitoring of Alterable Indicators*: Systemically checking warning signs of withdrawal (attendance, academic performance, behavior) that are readily available to school personnel and that can be altered through intervention.
- *Individualized and Timely Intervention*: Support tailored to individual student needs, based on level of engagement with school, associated influences of home and school, and the leveraging of local resources.
- *Long-Term Commitment*: Committing to students and families for at least two years, including the ability to follow highly mobile youth from school to school and program to program.
- *Persistence Plus*: A persistent source of academic motivation, a continuity of familiarity with the youth and family, and a consistency in the message that "education is important for your future".
- *Problem-Solving*: Designed to promote the acquisition of skills to resolve conflict constructively and to look for solutions rather than a source of blame.
- *Affiliation with School and Learning*: Facilitating students' access to and active participation in school-related activities and events.

Whether you can incorporate these or similar reforms in your school or not, there are important lessons to be learned from the mix of research findings about parent and community involvement:

- Involved parents and knowledgeable parents play a significant role in supporting whole-child development;

- Programs that focus on increasing family support for student’s development, like those developed by Epstein and Christensen, may have payoff for long-term student success, particularly for struggling students;
- Parent and community involvement in schools as a short-term strategy for improving student test scores may sidetrack efforts to increase student achievement, and may be seen by parents as manipulative or misaligned with their goals for their child;
- School leaders who wish intensify leadership by including parents and community members in more active roles in the school should consider options that do not place excessive additional demands on teachers, as they are likely to be involved in other school or district efforts that focus on their instructional practices.

Why are these ideas important? Most school leaders we talk with want to learn how to better work with parents and community resources. Thus, the issue for almost all principals concerns the challenges involved with *getting started* and then *sustaining* the effort over time. Here is a list of ideas to jump-start your efforts:

- *Focus on creating experiences of authentic engagement:* All of the examples of parent and community engagement provided in book started from the basic assumption that there was the benefit for all the parties involved. In none of these cases did the school set out to change or “fix” what something that was “broken.” Instead they looked out the doors and saw possibility. Authentic engagement of parents and community members, even if it is limited, builds trust.
- *Focus on varied and imaginative forms of two-way communication between home and school:* The issue is to keep trying until you find the best fit with your

- community. Address family skills, enable parents and community members to volunteer, provide learning opportunities at home and in the community, include parents in governance and decision-making, and promote collaboration with the community; wherever you think you can best begin the process.
- *Focus on specific community needs:* Gear your activities and plans to the diverse needs of families and their children and to the particular conditions of your school. All schools are not the same and a one-size fits all approach—even within the same district—most likely will not be effective. Learning about what surrounds you can only support your efforts. Get out in the community, walk around, and visit local churches, shops, playgrounds and parks, and don't rely on prior convictions and beliefs.
 - *Make a dream public—share the results you wish to create:* The object of forming lasting supportive relationships with the community is to intensify the leadership and to strengthen the school's culture. The goal is not “public relations” but finding and involving a larger number of people who are willing to dream with you. Make sure that your dream reflects the community's hopes and desires, and not simply the standards imposed by state and federal policy.
 - *Focus on strengths:* Seriously assess strengths within the families, the school, and the community starting with those efforts you believe are most likely to succeed. All communities have a foundation. By finding and capitalizing on that foundation, the work is likely to be better received and achieve early return on investment.

The overall message of this chapter has been focused on developing the ideas that community involvement can and should be part of the school leader's agenda – and is a must if the goal is really increasing student learning and engagement with school. The choice is which avenue you choose to approach the issue. We favor an approach that suggests that, as with all aspects of culture development and enhancement, starting with where you are and hunkering down for the journey is your best choice. Focusing on the community as a source of support for the school, a thoughtful approach to community involvement can help you face the increasingly hard work of school leadership and improvement.

Questions, Discussion and Reflection Activities for Chapter 7

Individual Reflections

- Take a virtual walk about your community. Google your local area and list the resources that are available to you and your students.
 - Make a list of possible resources for community involvement.
 - Make a list of any community leaders that you can find through organizational websites or in the newspaper.
- Take a physical walk about your school community, make appointments, drop by and visit with members of your external community. Interview them—questions you might ask include:
 - What is the primary mission of your agency?
 - What are the major things your organization does?
 - How would those intersect with the local school?
 - Are there ways in which we might work together?
 - Who is a good contact for further discussion?
- Complete the inventory on page 9 of this study guide.
 - Where do the strengths of your school community relationship lie?
 - Where are areas that you could invest some more effort?
 - How might you intensify leadership to include the community?
- Explore one of the web resources listed below.
 - Check and Connect: <http://ici.umn.edu/checkandconnect/>
 - Center on School, Family and Community Partnerships:
<http://www.csos.jhu.edu/P2000/center.htm>

- George Lucas Foundation: <http://www.edutopia.org/>
- George Lucas Foundation: Videos of community-focused schools.
http://www.edutopia.org/video?q=video&filter0=**ALL**&filter1=community

Group Discussion: (Use your individual reflections to help guide group discussion)

- Reflect on your past practices for community engagement. Discuss activities or initiatives that achieved or exceeded your expectations.
 - What qualities do your effective efforts share with the work of Epstein and Christensen?
 - Where might your future efforts benefit from actively focusing on including parents and other community members in problem solving (as Christensen discusses) or decision-making (as Epstein discusses)?
- What resources were you able to locate in your community? Of these which are you currently utilizing? Which are you not?
 - How might you either use established resources differently to become more effective?
 - How might you use the new resources you have located to enhance your school's culture?
- If you were to summarize the key themes of this chapter how would you do it?
 - What key terms and ideas would you highlight? Why?
 - What draws you to those ideas as opposed to others?
 - Develop a plan to share these ideas with other school leaders, faculty and staff, parents and other stakeholders.

Assessing Your School Community Relationship

Our school community relationship helps ...		
	Yes	No
Students to become more responsible.		
Teachers understand more about where children come from and what motivates children.		
The curriculum be more relevant for students.		
Teachers and parents work together to help students achieve.		
Schools be more accountable to the local community.		
Local community have input into important decisions within the school.		
Young people be more involved with decisions about their lives.		
Schools and parents come together to plan opportunities for students.		
Young people develop a sense of belonging to the wider community.		
Reduce vandalism and anti-social behavior among young people.		
The local area to be safer and more attractive.		
Adults as well as children to learn.		
Include parents in the education of their children and young people.		
The community to tackle racism and other forms of discrimination.		
Business and human service leaders to improve the chances for young people.		
Schools to prepare new immigrant groups to take part in society.		
Clarify fundamental values related to education.		
Improve discipline and behavior within the school.		
Schools to employ more people who understand the local community.		
Provide the necessary information so that people in the community can help to support the school.		