Enhancing Charter Schools through Parent Involvement

Amy Biehl High School, Community Montessori, East Mountain High School, Florida
Consortium of Public Charter Schools, Pacific Collegiate School, Taos Charter School, and Timpanogos Academy

SUMMARY Charter school laws in numerous states require charter schools to involve the parent community. However, most laws require only peripheral participation, such as garnering parent support for the school during the application process or keeping parents informed of student performance. These participation requirements do not take full advantage of charter schools’ potential to draw on the knowledge and expertise of their parent community. In response, some charter schools have taken a proactive approach by establishing programs that incorporate parent involvement systematically into school operations. In this promising practice profile, the National Resource Center on Charter School Finance and Governance highlights innovative methods for harnessing meaningful parent involvement. Practices range from creating a parent governing board to requiring parent participation at school events. In each case, parents play an active role in school decision-making, taking on responsibilities that include school financing, facilities acquisition, and accountability for student learning.

BACKGROUND Many charter schools are established by parents who want to create an alternative to traditional public schools or aim to become involved in their child’s education, so it is often assumed that fostering interest in parent involvement is not difficult. As schools of choice, charter schools offer parents a unique form of involvement from the time they decide their child will attend the school. Nevertheless, many charter schools are uncertain about how best to make use of the resources that parents can offer. A 2007 survey of charter school leaders found that parent involvement was one area about which leaders felt the least confident, with “nearly 23 percent of new
administrators admitting that they did not feel confident engaging parents." 1

The charter schools profiled here go beyond the traditional and peripheral ways to involve parents. They all benefit from strong parent support and, in some cases, parents have championed the school prior to the charter award. Several of the schools, such as East Mountain High School and Community Montessori, incorporate parent involvement in their mission statement. In every case, the profiled charter schools have created mutually beneficial relationships with parents; the parents contribute time to help enhance the school, and the school offers parents something in return.

This promising practice profile describes the parent involvement strategies of these charter schools:

- Amy Biehl High School —family meetings and exhibitions;
- Community Montessori—“Parent Involvement Partnership” meetings;
- East Mountain High School—parent volunteering requirement;
- Florida Consortium of Public Schools—Parent Coffee Hour;
- Pacific Collegiate School—online catalog of parent volunteer opportunities;
- Taos Charter School—parent fundraising organization; and
- Timpanogos Academy—parent-elected charter board.

IMPLEMENTATION DETAILS

Parent involvement in charter schools can be characterized by the type of activity (e.g., education-related or fundraising); by the time commitment (e.g., the frequency of events or mandated volunteer hours); and by the nature of the involvement (e.g., formal committee meetings or informal gatherings).

Type of Activity

With diverse parent populations, the charter schools highlighted in this promising practice profile offer opportunities for all parents to be involved, regardless of whether they work full time or are single parents. The strategies range from involving the entire parent community to having individual parents assume specific roles (see Strategies to Generate Strong Parent Involvement). For example, Timpanogos Academy in Utah has parents elect the charter board, making the board directly accountable to them. The school is governed by a seven-member board of directors. Parents elected to the board also serve as the community council for the school, which makes decisions on trust lands money and school improvement planning. Each board of director position lasts three years after the initial term, and the positions are elected in a staggered rotation with approximately two seats elected each year. The Timpanogos Academy charter provides for representative governance, which mandates responsiveness to constituent concerns. If parents believe any board member is not performing in the school’s best interest, a recall provision is written into the charter.

Taos Charter School in New Mexico relies on its parent community for fundraising. The Friends of Taos Charter School, a parent group formed as a nonprofit organization to raise money for the school, was able to access funds for school facilities; charter schools in New Mexico cannot obtain loans directly. The parents also convinced a local developer to donate seven acres to the school and participated in the school’s landscaping design and architecture. Parents garnered additional publicity for the school when they asked the governor to speak at an event and announce he would be requesting a $1 million appropriation for a school building. Although the legislature ultimately did not approve the proposed appropriation, the school still benefited from the publicity generated by the mayor’s support.

Several charter schools with promising parent involvement practices have active parent groups that meet weekly or monthly to assess school needs and determine how they can contribute. For example, Community Montessori parents can chair one of six different committees, including publicity and facility management. The school offers parent workshops and trainings specific to the committee on which they serve. Pacific Collegiate sponsors about 17 parent education events each year, using both outside and in-house experts from the school or the parent population. The experts lead programs focusing on topics (e.g., child development, school governance, and education reform) that help prepare parents to serve in decision-making roles at the school. This has resulted in almost 15,000 hours of

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parent service. Amy Biehl High School has monthly parent committee meetings to help target parent involvement efforts. In one instance, the parents successfully lobbied local government to change zoning laws to allow for a new school facility in downtown Albuquerque.

Strategies to Generate Strong Parent Involvement
To generate strong parent involvement, charter schools can pursue these strategies:

- Provide a walk through of the school to welcome parents and build connections among teachers, administrators, parents, and community members;
- Hold two family involvement activities each quarter to keep parent involvement ongoing;
- Exhibit student work in the school and broader community;
- Survey parents about their goals for their children and then help them reach those goals through parent education; and,
- Develop a “job description” of an involved parent to help parents understand how they can best participate in their child’s education.


Nature of the Involvement
As a condition of enrollment, Amy Biehl High School requires parents to attend family meetings and exhibitions. During family meetings, which are held at the school during the evening, each family (parents and student) meets with the dean and an advisor who has been trained by a social worker. Together they discuss the student’s strengths and areas he or she needs to improve. If the student is having difficulty, the discussion is a way for the student, parents, and staff to begin working on a plan to address the issues. In contrast to traditional parent-teacher conferences in which the student is the point of discussion, family meetings at Amy Biehl are student-directed; the student is the facilitator, taking an active role in directing conversation rather than being the topic of conversation. Similarly, the Amy Biehl school community considers exhibitions as high-stakes public assessments. Student work is on display at the school and critiqued in an interactive forum involving parents, teachers, and students. Tony Montefiletto, Amy Biehl High’s executive director, indicates the family meetings and exhibitions play an important role in building the culture of the school and situating parents and students as change agents in students’ learning. Parents are required to attend both functions; if they fail to do so, their child cannot enroll for the following year until the requirements are met.

On a more social level, the Florida Consortium of Public Charter Schools offers an informal Parent Coffee Hour each month in which parents meet before school with faculty and staff to share information and raise concerns. Director Robert Haag reports that because the setting
is informal, parents feel comfortable sharing concerns in an open and nonconfrontational manner. Moreover, this practice prevents issues from escalating; complaints are addressed quickly and on a personal level. Although the coffee hour is not mandatory, Haag notes that parent attendance and satisfaction with the meetings is high throughout the year.

**IMPACT**

All the schools employing these promising practices report high levels of parent involvement. At Amy Biehl, where the school will not enroll a student for the next year until the parents have participated in both a family meeting and an exhibition, parent involvement is 100 percent. Community Montessori reports that approximately 90 percent of its parents are involved in various programs; positive impacts include an increased sense of ownership among parents and a stronger sense of community. Through the Parent Coffee Hour at the Florida Consortium of Public Charter Schools, issues that might undermine the community if left unattended are raised through casual discussion. The meetings help foster congenial relationships between teachers and parents outside the classroom.

The public support and recognition charter schools gain through parent involvement is also noteworthy. According to Nancy O’Bryan, director of Taos Charter School, parents “rallied to get the governor to attend the opening of the school.” Parent volunteers also increase the number and skills of people who can contribute to school operations. In addition, through their participation, parents become more knowledgeable about and committed to school initiatives, especially if they have been involved in their creation. This reciprocal impact—benefits to the parents as well as the school—can be seen in all the profiled charter schools.

For students, parent involvement can help increase personal accountability and learning opportunities. Amy Biehl’s education program requires all students to take two courses at the local community college during their senior year. Students report feeling very prepared for college courses, largely because they have had “exhibitions” of their high school work during which parents and staff questioned them about their challenges and accomplishments. Finally, parent volunteers help expand the learning opportunities for charter school students by, for example, staffing athletic teams, advanced math classes, and community outreach programs.

**LESSONS LEARNED**

**Implementation Challenges**

One challenge charter schools may experience in creating parent involvement programs is how to sustain parent interest in volunteering over the long term. Schools in low socioeconomic neighborhoods may have difficulty requiring parents, especially those heading single-parent homes who must work irregular hours or more than one job, to continually invest many hours while their child attends the charter school. Paying a fee in lieu of volunteering, such as at East Mountain High, may also dissuade families that are struggling financially. In addition, some states prohibit charter schools from imposing a fee of this nature. Being upfront with parents, early on and often, about their roles and responsibilities as members of the school community is essential not only for student success, but also to the charter school’s survival as a school of choice.

Some of the programs and practices involve a large investment of time and dedication, not just from the parents, but also from faculty and staff. In some instances, this has led charter schools to add staff. Amy Biehl High School, for example, hired a parent liaison to maintain regular communication between parents and faculty. The national network of Accelerated Schools has parent committees that monitor parent commitment and involvement. Also important is the idea that faculty members are expected to keep in close contact with parents. To encourage such partnering, schools often build time into the work week to reduce teacher burnout. Amy Biehl High School suspends regular classes on certain days to give teachers time to train with the social worker and dean for family meetings. Teachers and students also use this time to prepare for their exhibitions.

Finally, monitoring and enforcement of parent involvement requirements can be difficult. Pacific Collegiate has an automated system that enables parents to log in their participatory hours; however, no consequences exist if a family does not fulfill its requirements. Principal Andrew Goldenkranz cautions that if personal relationships...
between school staff and parents are not developed, the
hours become a compliance issue rather than a collabora-
tive effort to enhance the school. Parent politics can also
be a challenge if some parents believe they are contributing
while others are not. Although Amy Biehl denies enroll-
ment to students whose parents do not attend the manda-
tory four meetings, most other schools do not monitor or
explicitly enforce parent involvement requirements. East
Mountain High School does not monitor whether parents’
service hours are completed or whether the fee is paid;
instead, parents are expected to monitor themselves.
According to Goldenkranz, schools need to assume that
parents who choose to be part of the charter community
will do what is expected. However, even with very sup-
portive parent environments, most schools do not have 100
percent parent involvement; this percentage could greatly
decrease in less supportive communities.

Keys to Success

A high caliber of parents and teachers who assume
active roles as parent involvement facilitators is one key
to success, according to leaders of the profiled charter
schools. Many of these parents and teachers take it upon
themselves to be change agents for the school. They par-
ticipate on committees and promote academic and ex-
tracurricular programs. Dedicated parents and teachers
provide the human capital to make things happen for the
school. Having parents and teachers who are determined to
keep motivation high and ensure plans are implemented is
essential. This is not limited to a single well-intentioned in-
dividual; collaboration and ongoing communication between
parents and teachers is required to create a sense of com-
unity. In some cases, teachers support parent involvement
by attending events and acknowledging the importance of
parental involvement. In other cases, school missions that
explicitly point out the importance of parent involvement
may boost parents’ motivation to participate. Barbara
Burke-Fondren, director of Community Montessori, re-
ports that her school supports parent involvement by ad-
hering to a philosophy of “parents are the students’ primary
teacher.” Regardless of the approach, the profiled charter
schools worked to enhance parents’ experiences with the
school, often through parent education and increased ac-
cess to teachers. In this way, the benefits of parent involve-
ment flow two ways—between the parents and the school
and the school and the parents.

A clear sense of direction is another factor leaders of
the profiled charter schools believe is key to success. When
goals are clear, parent participation efforts are focused.
Results can be observed and accountability increases.
Charter schools often communicate their expectations for
the community by using parent contracts and emphasizing the
importance of parent involvement in their mission
statement. It is also not unusual for charter schools to hold
an orientation meeting for families interested in enrolling
their children in the charter school to educate them about
mutual responsibilities—what the school will do for their children and what the families need to do for the school.
Such approaches help ensure the entire school community
is working together as a team toward a particular vision.

Appreciation is also important for sustaining parent
involvement over the long term. Leaders of the profiled
schools say that when parents’ efforts are acknowledged,
the relationships become more collaborative and institu-
tionalized. East Mountain High School sends out thank-you
letters to let parents know their efforts are appreciated.
Pacific Collegiate, in thanking parents for their contribu-
tions, emphasizes how parents’ efforts have directly ben-
efited the school.

ADDITIONAL COMMENTS

Although research on the benefits of parent involvement
has not established a definitive correlation between parent
involvement and student achievement, qualitative research
suggests that students’ performance improves when par-
ents are actively involved in their school (see the section
on Useful Resources). Anecdotally, all the profiled charter
schools report a high student success rate.

In each of the profiled charter schools, parents be-
lieve they have a voice regarding their children’s education.
Moreover, the schools share a common aim of viewing par-
ents as teachers. All the schools acknowledge that parents
who are actively involved with the school play a large role
in the development of the child. Therefore, the charter
school must not only foster collaboration between teachers
and parents, but also enhance the knowledge and expertise
of both groups. Amy Biehl High has received a Coalition
of Essential Schools grant to serve as a mentor school for
other charters that want to follow the school’s model of
parent involvement.

Also noteworthy among the profiled charter schools is
that most of the promising practices in parent involvement require very little funding; they rely heavily on volunteers. Furthermore, many parent involvement activities help generate supplemental funds for charter schools, which compared with traditional public schools tend to be under-financed and underresourced. A few of the profiled charter schools have small budgets for parent involvement that include funding to train teachers and parents on how to work together or to train them in the specific skills they need to get their jobs done.

USEFUL RESOURCES
Survey results showing high parent satisfaction at East Mountain High School: http://www.eastmountainhigh.net/survey/SurveyResultsAPS-EMHS-06-07.doc.


The online form for parents to report their volunteer hours at Timpanogos Academy: http://timpacademy.org/#reportHours


Description of Community Montessori’s parent involvement program and online log for volunteer hours: http://www.shiningminds.com/FamilyConnection.html.

Research on the relationship between parent involvement and student outcomes:

Informational guide on creating strong parent involvement practices:

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To nominate a promising practice for inclusion in this series, go to http://www.charterresource.org/promising/nomination.asp.