

REPORT AND RECOMMENDATIONS FROM THE

TENNESSEE FAMILY/SCHOOL/COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT SUMMIT



April 15, 2010
Martin Professional Development Center
Nashville, Tennessee

Tennessee



Engagement Summit



“A school is a building with our future inside.”

Earl Wiman, President, TEA

The Martin Professional Development Center in Nashville was the place to be in Tennessee on April 15, 2010. Leadership of the education community came together with representatives of state government, family and parent organizations, community activists, the business community, the faith community and a variety of other stakeholders to explore the barriers to meaningful family engagement in schools. Through presentations, panel discussion and considerable time spent in small group discussions, conclusions and solutions surfaced that may well lead to a coordinated approach to increasing family engagement, while providing several missing links to school improvement. A number of the recommendations and actions generated in the small group discussions were shared with a policy maker panel. Most importantly, commitments were made for continued action at the local level.

The pervasive themes that emerged focused on coalition and collaboration. Starting with Governor Phil Bredesen, participants were admonished that “we cannot do what we need to do without broadening out, without reaching out to the larger community and sharing the responsibility for school improvement and student success.” Governor Bredesen used as a very positive example, the collaboration that resulted in Tennessee’s successful *Race to the Top* proposal and contended that “for us to get things done, we need to learn collaboration sustainability.”

On the strength of 24 organizations working in partnership, over 280 concerned stakeholders discussed the challenges of partnership and collaboration. The Summit focused on various aspects of family engagement - getting and keeping families involved in student learning. The object was to dig more deeply into the barriers to parent/family engagement in schools and to develop recommendations for those who have the power to make changes to policy and practice.

The basic premise of the Summit was that it will take the combined efforts of the broader community, working in close collaboration with the school community, to bring the emphasis and priority needed to raise meaningful family engagement to the level of importance and consistency necessary for every student’s success.

Threaded throughout the Summit were ideas and suggestions that opened the essential conversation: What can parents and teachers learn from each other? What does the community expect from its schools and what do schools need and expect from their communities? How do we change the culture of the state, its schools and families to the point that every student will graduate from high school, college or career ready? The uniqueness of this Summit was that it brought all of the stakeholders to the table in a way that allowed opinion to be shared and heard in ways not possible previously.

“For us to get things done, we need to learn collaboration and sustainability.”

Governor Phil Bredesen

Former Senator Bill Frist, speaking at the opening session, emphasized that action needed to be taken at the local level. He contended that community resources needed to be aligned at the local level to support schools. He committed the full resources of SCORE, an organization over which Senator Frist presides, to build on the commitments made at the Summit and based on the ‘real’ experiences of the participants. He challenged participants to bring together the business community, the faith community and the school community to improve every school. Responding to that challenge, participants fashioned regional and local commitments to accomplish once the Summit concluded.

BARRIERS, ISSUES AND OPPORTUNITIES

Research is consistent on the correlation between parent, school and community engagement. In their paper, “The Price We Pay: Economic and Social Consequences of Inadequate Education,” Belfield and Leven cite parent-family-community involvement as a key to addressing the dropout crisis. They note that strong school-family-community partnerships foster higher educational aspirations and lead to more motivated students. This correlation was also prominent in the Tennessee Race to the Top plan by, in part, using achievement data to provide parents and teachers with information on student progress early enough to modify teaching strategies to meet individual student needs. The plan also requires that each school have and implement a program to increase family engagement. Progress will be included in the annual [Tennessee Report Card for Schools](#). These and other efforts indicate that up to this point, insufficient progress has been made to engage families.

Barriers, both direct and indirect, continue to exist. The barriers are cultural, economic and social. They come as a consequence of both a lack of full understanding and a lack of sufficient resources. They come as a consequence of a failure to use the resources available and a failure to coordinate efforts. Barriers exist because of inadequacies in the preparation of school personnel and because of ineffective communication between schools, their communities and the families and parents of the student population.

The list of barriers is legion. The purpose of the Summit was to identify the barriers to meaningful family engagement and to generate recommendations that will serve to ameliorate the barriers and build solutions.

The more essential question is, what can be done? What can be done at the school district, community, and state level to engage all the resources of the state in a coordinated effort to assure economic viability for Tennessee and educational success for every student?

What follows are many of the ideas, actions and solutions that were generated at the Summit. They represent the breadth of the conversation and the depth of the creativity brought into focus in considering family engagement. They are organized in such a way as to be useable to all of the various stakeholders to this process.

SMALL GROUP DISCUSSION TOPICS

- Jobs and Education
- Tennessee Diploma Project
- Rural Families
- Families of At-Risk Students
- Middle and High School
- Immigrant and Non-English Speaking Families
- School Personnel Preparation
- Engaging the Faith Community
- Engaging the Business Community



SCHOOL DISTRICTS

- Provide opportunities outside of the school day for families to interact with teachers and staff. Hold parent meetings at different times and/or days to accommodate working parents. Conduct regular school/family meetings in locations other than in school buildings.
- Train all school staff in community-based cultural awareness.
- Create opportunities for school personnel to “get out into the community.” Have faculty tours of the school district prior to the school year beginning. Encourage teachers to know the community from which their students come.
- Invite parents to be part of school policy development and improvement planning.
- Establish a program that will address the basic needs of the immigrant population in each school community.
- Require school districts to develop and implement comprehensive parent engagement programs at all school sites.
- Expose students to career opportunities in partnership with local businesses and make them more aware of the link between careers and education. Such partnerships may result in shadowing and apprenticeship experiences for students. Incorporate learning about specific career-related skills and knowledge into the standard curriculum.
- Provide opportunities for extended learning outside the classroom through internships, online learning, externships, immersion, professional development, linkages to subject matter experts and trade and professional organizations.
- Use a variety of methods including direct phone calls, e-mail, Web site, Facebook, You Tube and other media to communicate more directly with parents.
- Prepare a Business Toolbox for the business community to share what the important needs of the schools are and how the business community can help meet those needs.
- Strive to make all schools parent friendly including having a greeter at the front desk that has a positive attitude and is trained in customer service. Provide annual professional development for all staff members on what it means to be family friendly.
- Capitalize on the energy, passion, and talents of PTA and PTO members for support far beyond fundraising activities.

COMMUNITY ORGANIZATIONS, BUSINESSES AND SCHOOL DISTRICTS

- Integrate business involvement in education through two-way communications of school needs and parental concerns, using such vehicles as meetings, open houses and printed materials in order to make business interaction effective by removing communication barriers.
- Make businesses more visible in the community by asking them to provide rewards for students that perform at high levels of academic achievement.
- Create formal opportunities to bring students, parents, educators and businesses together to create a link between education and careers.
- Provide recognition for employers who establish leave policies allowing their employees to be actively involved with their children’s schools.

- Work with businesses and community agencies to identify groups of mentors/volunteers who can provide resources to children in an advocacy role within their community.
- Solicit organizations such as AARP to provide volunteers for efforts that require more time than is available for regular school personnel.
- Develop forums within which faith-based leaders and educational leaders can partner to create opportunities for collaboration, identify resources and enhance educational opportunities for children.
- Partner to provide meaningful after-school activities and extended learning opportunities for students that serve to motivate students and increase student aspirations. Provide opportunities for homework assistance.
- Establish an initiative to build links between schools and interfaith communities that enhance parental/guardian involvement and student achievement.
- Use community partners to host local/regional meetings in non-threatening environments where parents can be educated on the school standards and importance of education for children to be prepared for college and for the workforce.
- Sponsor an annual “Parent Night” in each school district that brings together families, school personnel and community groups as a beginning-of-the-school-year activity.
- Build partnerships with ethnic associations within the school community to help assimilate children and families into the school community. Create opportunities for “living history” speakers and success stories based on completing a high school education or beyond.

SCHOOL DISTRICTS, HIGHER EDUCATION AND THE STATE

- Create and require cultural competency training for all staff/ parents/ teachers that reflects the diversity of all stakeholders and fosters a welcoming school that accepts and embraces all students.
- Develop and implement professional development in both teacher pre-service and in-service education to enable educators to understand the unique culture of rural communities and to encourage better engagement of rural students and their families.
- Require more intentional and experiential learning centered on collaboration, communication and cultural understanding between parents, community and school in pre-service training for teachers, counselors and administrators.
- Work to change the public attitude toward the teaching profession in order to attract the best and brightest to the profession.
- Create formal partnerships between college education departments and individual school systems so that curriculum can be more relevant and focused.
- Redesign college education programs to better prepare teachers on how to work with parents and families.
- Assure a robust student teacher mentoring experience that incorporates opportunities for family engagement and working with diverse cultures.
- Provide ongoing professional development based on student achievement and value-added data.
- Integrate community and parental engagement in the new evaluation tool for educators that will be developed as part of the Race to the Top initiative.

DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION

- Amend state policy to allow additional time for all high school students to meet college and work-ready standards. Support school district initiatives to create flexible schedules that better meet student and family schedules.
- Amend state policy to lower pupil-teacher ratios in middle schools.

- Improve data systems for tracking enrollments, student records and testing information across school districts.
- Develop and implement a statewide initiative to recruit culturally diverse bilingual teachers and administrators.
- Increase the emphasis on family engagement in performance-based licensure standards for teachers, counselors and administrators.
- Survey districts to identify current experiential learning best practices and develop professional development for teachers and school counselors based on these best practices.
- Survey and disseminate best practices and good ideas that are already working in school districts such as parent/student literacy groups and math breakfasts where early morning breakfasts are used to help parents learn how to teach or reinforce math skills.
- Assure that the emerging definition of “highly effective teacher” and school leader includes a measure of ‘effective’ parent engagement.

LEGISLATIVE ACTIONS

- Revise the Basic Education Program formula to double the number of school counselors available to students in poverty. This legislation should require that:
 - School counselors be trained to help direct students to careers and avenues for scholarships/funding.
 - School counselors develop six-year plans for students — H.S. + 2 years’ post-secondary.
 - School counselors have, as a required objective, including parents or families in educational decisions for students.
- Enact legislation that requires that all employees receive a paid benefit of 15 hours per year for activities related to school for their children or children for whom they have legal responsibility—activities to include but not be limited to Parent-Teacher Conferences, IEP Meetings, Disciplinary Meetings and Classroom Observations.
- Establish a parent liaison/social worker position as a part of the BEP formula at a ratio of one position per 50 students.
- Enact legislation providing funding support to make it possible for all parents to have access to their children’s school. Such funding may support transportation, child care, technology and engagement/education workshops that bring together parents, families and school personnel.
- Enact legislation that will make a “Connected Tennessee” a reality within the next five years.
- Create and fund a comprehensive statewide plan to increase communication among schools, families and the broader community. This plan should include public service announcements on the value of education and the richness of a multi-cultural environment, consistently tying the economic viability of the state to education.

LOCAL/REGIONAL COMMITMENTS: WHAT INDIVIDUAL PARTICIPANTS WILL DO TO CONTINUE THE SPIRIT OF THE SUMMIT

As the Summit was drawing to an end, small groups met by region to consider all of the ideas, comments, recommendations and actions that were discussed and presented during the day. These groups were charged with the task of determining specific actions that they believed were most possible to implement in their home district or region. The sense of mission, “leaving the Summit with something to do tomorrow,” meant that the day ended as it began on a positive, collaborative note. The responses were as varied and diverse as the groups represented at the Summit.

- With a goal of bringing consistency to the definition of engagement, a group from Metro Nashville committed to convening a diverse population of metro schools and community stakeholders to



- reach consensus on the meaning of engagement among parents, schools and communities and then develop training for all district staff so that there can be consistency in understanding and implementing true engagement practices.
- Another group from Hamilton County committed to creating training for school personnel on how to develop and sustain a welcoming school environment. They also committed to restarting the district Parent Advisory Committee to increase information sharing and multi-directional communication.
- The Memphis City group established a goal to foster an environment that builds mutually beneficial relationships among parents, school and communities. One of their commitments to achieve this goal was to dedicate the time and resources necessary to build the capacity of parents and students to be actively engaged in education decisions.
- The participants from Rutherford County agreed to use the local United Way and other civic organizations to bring together the leadership of schools, universities, parents, inter-faith groups and other interested parties to present the recommendations from the Summit and develop a course of action to implement the relevant recommendations.

These commitments together with many others will serve to sustain the sense of coalition and collaboration.

CONCLUSION AND THE CHALLENGE GOING FORWARD

In April the challenge was issued. While much has been accomplished over the past several years since the Tennessee Department of Education incorporated a family engagement policy into its compliance requirements under the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 and the National PTA concluded its work on Parent Engagement Standards, it is clear that much more needs to be done.

“I feel like I’m leaving today with something I can use tomorrow.”

—A teacher from Warren County

Comments from the vast majority of Summit participants was that the networking design the Summit provided was most helpful and would certainly reap significant benefits in the future. Teachers and school leaders discussing these critical issues with parents, family advocates, community and faith leaders, state level policy makers and the business community created an opportunity for innovative thinking, candor, coalition and collaboration.

The challenge going forward is to sustain the spirit of the Summit. The challenge to leaders that care about families and students is to see if a planned, coordinated, step-by-step approach to meaningful family engagement can be accomplished in every school district and in every school. As Earl Wiman, President of the Tennessee Education Association said, “Schools cannot do it alone.” To assure that Tennessee fulfills the promise of “First to the Top” will take the combined resources and expertise of the entire Tennessee community working together with a shared vision and sense of the possible.

SPECIAL APPRECIATION FOR FUNDING

Hyde Family Foundation

Niswonger Foundation

Tennessee Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development

Tennessee Education Association

Tennessee Department of Education

United Ways of Tennessee

National Education Association

SUMMIT COALITION PARTNERS

AARP Tennessee

ASCD Tennessee

ARC of Tennessee

Big Brothers, Big Sisters of Middle Tennessee

Conexion Americas

Hyde Family Foundation

Mid East Tennessee Regional P-16 Council

National Board for Professional Teaching Standards

National Education Association

Niswonger Foundation

Office of Governor Bredesen

Stand for Children

Support & Training for Exceptional Parents (STEP, Inc.)

Tennessee Alliance for Children and Families

Tennessee Department of Education

Tennessee NAACP

Tennessee Education Association

Tennessee Parent Information Resource Center

Tennessee Parent Teachers Association

Tennessee Retired Teachers Association

Tennessee School Boards Association

Tennessee State Collaborative on Reforming Education (SCORE)

United Ways of Tennessee

Urban League of Mid Tennessee

