

SOWING SEEDS, PLANTING PARTNERSHIPS, HARVESTING RELATIONSHIPS

Wisconsin Dept. of Public Instruction
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The vision of the Bright Beginnings/Family-School-Community Partnership Team at the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction (DPI) dares to dream a mighty hope: that “all children will grow up in nurturing, healthy, and safe learning environments in which all families are fully supported in their roles and responsibilities.” By creating and advancing family-school-community partnerships, the Team specifically seeks to ensure successful learners and stronger communities.

The Department’s program of family-school-community partnerships started when the current State Superintendent proclaimed 1987 as “The Year of the Family in Education” to draw attention to the important role of parents as their children’s first and most influential teachers, as well as the need for schools to involve families in all aspects of their children’s learning. The State Superintendent’s Task Force on Family Involvement advised Department staff in sponsoring a statewide public awareness campaign, recognizing exemplary schools and families for their efforts, and developing monthly packets of ideas and reproducible articles for schools promoting family involvement.

The Department continued to publish family involvement packets, and in 1992 enthusiastically adopted the research and six types of involvement by Joyce Epstein as the framework for its partnership program.

Wisconsin has historically been a state of strong local control. The partnership practices of the Wisconsin DPI reflect this faith in that which is “home-grown.” Our state leadership efforts can be divided into three strands: Sowing Seeds, Planting Partnerships, and Harvesting Relationships.

“Sowing Seeds” consists of informing schools about how to start and scale up their partnership practices by inviting school and district teams to attend an annual DPI Family-School-Community Partnership Conference. The Action Teams attending this conference consist of at least one parent, teacher, school administrator, and school board or community member.

Time and structure to talk, think, and plan are provided for teams during this conference, and we hear that some of the best partnership ideas are born during the car ride home. We strongly advise teams to save gas and splurge on brainstorming by sharing a vehicle! Teams also have many opportunities to listen to the successes

and challenges of other partnership teams and network with others. The emphasis for the estimated 250 teams who have participated in the conference is on asking parents and teachers what they need and, through reflection and group consensus, deciding which actions will help meet those needs.

To ensure that no team arrives home without a little “fertilizer” to help their partnership plans take root, we traditionally offer \$300 to \$500 seed grants to all teams attending the workshop. Although only about 75% of teams actually claim reimbursement of the seed grants—we suspect that some school business offices simply fold partnership expenses into other accounts—others appreciate that this small seed grant is tagged exclusively—sometimes for the first time—for partnerships.

Some of our most heartening partnership stories come from school staff who say that the conference allows them to “do” partnerships as a recognized, methodical way of helping children learn, and from parents who are finally given the chance to have a voice in how things are done. Tiffany Creek Elementary School in rural Boyceville, for example, used its \$300 seed grant in 1997 to respond to parents’ calls for better information about what children were learning and how parents could support student learning. The school developed grade-level brochures listing major learning objectives in each content area, information about the child’s social, emotional, and physical development at each grade level, homework expectations, and school events involving families.

“Our team, consisting of school employees, Head Start staff, and parents... was particularly interested in focusing on what schools could do for and with parents and community members, rather than on what we wanted or expected parents and community members to do for us!” Principal Delesa Boley wrote. “Our team listened closely to parents and discovered a need to improve communication. The (\$300 seed grant) will allow us to complete a project that will address the need to keep communication lines open between our school and families.”

Seed grant recipients are asked to report near year’s end how their funds were spent to advance partnerships. They also receive *Sharesheet* twice a year, the DPI newsletter for partnership practitioners in Wisconsin.

To help “plant partnerships,” or gently fold them into the operating structure of the school or district, DPI also offers teams who join the National Network of Partnership Schools the opportunity to apply for a \$2,000 Wisconsin Partnership Schools grant. The monies must be used to pay a Partnership Coordinator, hopefully a parent, to conduct partnership planning and activities, and support the school’s connection with other schools and districts engaged in partnerships.

Wisconsin has offered these grants for each of the past three years and has assembled an enthusiastic core group of about 60 National Network and Wisconsin Partnership School members from the district and school building levels.

Recipients report that the Wisconsin Partnership Schools grant allows them to complete partnership plans and activities at a higher level by connecting them to student learning objectives. This may be due to the fact that most grantees have established a commitment to conducting meaningful partnerships and are experienced practitioners. Or, it may be due to an increased amount of respect that teachers and other staff reportedly give a partnership coordinator who is paid, versus the parent who volunteers to help with partnerships.

The Whitewater School District, for example, placed a partnership coordinator in one school three years ago with its first Wisconsin Partnership Schools grant. The district now has a coordinator in every building in the district, including the high school and middle school. Each coordinator is paid \$3,000 to work 25 hours a week and organize the more than 1,300 people who volunteer in Whitewater schools for over 12,000 hours each year. "The district's One-Year Action Plan is carefully aligned with our Goals 2000 initiatives," Key Contact Sharon McCullough wrote. "In this way we can concentrate efforts on improving partnerships between schools, parents, and the community without "adding on" and becoming fragmented."

At the state level, we "harvest relationships" by helping our partnership practitioners get to know one another and cultivate a willingness to call upon each other for advice and to celebrate. Many partnership teams perennially return to learn and share strategies with the other 60 teams at the annual DPI Partnership Conference. We call upon them to be presenters during the conference, and invite them to share experiences during two statewide videoconferences DPI hosts for Partnership Schools during the year. Their stories are also told in two *Learning Together* packets DPI publishes annually and sends to all Wisconsin schools, PTA leaders, and teachers statewide.

We are exploring the possibilities of collecting data and formally measuring how partnerships may contribute to helping children learn, but at present our results come mainly in the form of anecdotes. Partnership Coordinator Ann Kaiser, for example, reported that parent listening sessions conducted by the new Partnership Committee at Altoona Middle School revealed that many parents were frustrated by a lack of information about school expectations for fifth grade students. "Most of the concerns brought to us have centered around communication issues, and some neat things have come from this," she wrote. "Right now we're working on a biggie; 5th grade is a big jump in terms of expectations, homework, consequences for late assignments, etc. We've sponsored a couple of parent nights surrounding positive problem solving. Those solutions are being given to 4th and 5th grade staff for them to look at in a joint meeting, something very needed that hasn't happened before."

The Altoona Middle School Partnership Committee is also considering implementing two new practices to address parents' concerns: a 5th Grade Welcome Night to try lockers, walk through schedules, and meet teachers in an informal atmosphere, and a tip sheet from parents to parents on ways to help their children.

DPI supports its partnership efforts with federal Goals 2000 and Title VI funds. The Title VI funds support one full-time partnership coordinator position at the Department. In 1998-99, State Superintendent John Benson allocated the expenditure of \$20,000 in Goals 20000 funds to pay for the two-day annual partnership conference, as well as \$300 seed grants for 50 teams. Title I and Title IV funds also helped with conference expenses.

In addition, the Department spent \$60,000 in Goals 2000 funds to pay for 30 Wisconsin Partnership School grants (\$2,000 each) and \$3,000 to conduct two statewide videoconferences.

A must for any state attempting to implement and spread partnerships is active support and encouragement from the state superintendent and/or state board of education, and a way to cultivate consideration of school-family-community partnerships across the slate of educational programs and initiatives in each department.

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