

# FAMILY INVOLVEMENT COORDINATING COMMITTEE

Howard County Public School System  
Ellicott City, Maryland

Howard County, Maryland is a community of 234,710 situated midway along a corridor linking Baltimore and Washington, D.C. The Howard County Public School System (HCPSS) is a source of local pride. For seven consecutive years, the system has maintained its standing as the top-rated school system in Maryland as measured by the Maryland State Performance Report Card. Currently the school system operates 65 instructional facilities serving more than 42,000 students. As the liaison for Family and Community Outreach in the Office of Academic Support, my role is to serve as a resource across all service areas, and to facilitate the integration of resources among the central office, schools, families, and the community. In addition, I work directly with schools and families to support their efforts to develop and maintain strong home-school partnerships. It has been my desire, as the Key Contact to the National Network of Partnership Schools, to develop an “action team” approach at the central-office level that would drive effective and efficient family involvement practices district-wide. I wanted a district framework to help us:

- Become better informed about the services we offer to parents and families
- Align our services to parents and families in an efficient and effective manner
- Communicate and collaborate with each other, as well as the schools and the community
- Share best practices

In January of 1999, I invited a representative from each central office service area, as well as family liaisons serving in various program areas, to the first meeting of the Central Office Family Involvement Coordinating Committee (FICC). I had already made some inquiries with associate superintendents, supervisors and other administrative personnel to create the list of “invitees” from A to Z—or in our case from Busses to Testing. I informed them that the FICC was being organized to maximize the school system’s efforts to build strong home-school partnerships with all families across all service areas. Included with the invitation was a request for information that would help the committee members gain some knowledge of current involvement practices. I asked for the following information in questionnaire format to be sent to me prior to the meeting:

- Name, Title, Department
- Description of services or information you or your office provide to families
- Ethnicity, language group and/or socioeconomic status of families receiving services or information from your office
- Current family involvement concerns

The first meeting was set for January 22<sup>nd</sup> from 9:00am to 11:00am. Thirty people were invited. Seven were unable to attend, but five of those forwarded the questionnaire. Breakfast treats consisting of a fruit bowl, assorted breads and spreads, and a variety of teas, juices, and coffee created a welcoming gathering time. It was interesting to note how many people did not know each other. Perhaps a name was familiar or a face or the service, but now it was all coming together.

The meeting began with a statement of the HCPSS Goal I:

*Ensure that each student meets or exceeds rigorous performance and achievement standards.*

Indicator 1.5 of Goal I states:

*Academic achievement data is free of patterns associated with gender, ethnicity, learning styles, and socioeconomic status.*

An overview and discussion of the objectives I had set for the committee to meet Goal I followed. The objectives were:

- To gain an awareness of services provided to families from the HCPSS
- To identify common concerns about family involvement
- To develop district-wide strategies to address identified concerns
- To develop a process for ensuring alignment, and efficient and effective services to families
- To develop measures for assessing the efficiency and effectiveness of the HCPSS

The committee was in agreement that these objectives would help us to accomplish Goal I.

The warm-up activity was “A Fascinating Family Service Fact!” This was a fun way for everyone to introduce themselves and their roles. The idea was to share with someone a fascinating fact about your service delivery that might not be widely known. Then that person shared it with the group—in 30 seconds or less. What a feat for this crew!

This was followed by an overview of service delivery concerns from parents and teachers within the system. Resources utilized were the data from a recent systemic customer satisfaction survey, and the results of focus group meetings with underrepresented subgroup populations in our system. The focus group participants were parent representatives of the Korean, Latino, and Hatian communities, as well as low income African Americans and Whites residing in the western and eastern ends of the county.

In small groups we generated central office concerns about gaps in service delivery to all families. The concerns were prioritized in the large group settings. The major concerns centered around ongoing communication to all families, a lack of coordinated service delivery to families, the need to build awareness and funding to resolve family inaccessibility issues, and providing seamless K-12 delivery.

The meeting evaluation forms were extremely positive and encouraging. The verbal comments and feedback were full of excellent suggestions for future meeting agendas, as well as ideas for networking and sharing. My homework was to create a directory of all the members and compile a compendium of their services. Several people had resource material they wanted to share, so I promised to copy for all whatever was sent ahead to me.

At the March meeting each member received a notebook full of family involvement resource materials, best practices (including those in *Promising Partnership Practices 1998*), and staff development models and frameworks for reform. Someone said the notebook was the best part of being on the committee. In addition, strategies to address the communication concerns were developed and applied to the core processes for district strategic planning (staffing, policy, instruction, accountability, time, curriculum design, alignment, resource development, and staff development).

At the meeting held in May, the committee formed task groups to focus on the concerns generated at the January meeting. Starting in July, each task group will begin to address the goals of the Family Involvement Coordinating Committee. For the upcoming school year the committee plans to meet at least quarterly, while the task groups will meet more frequently. Over time, the task groups should develop promising partnership practices for all the families in Howard County.

Jean Lewis, Family and Community Outreach Liaison  
(410) 313-6794