

# A District-Level Partnership Approach to Student Achievement

Connecticut State Department of Education  
Hartford, Connecticut

The goal of making School/Family/Community Partnerships (SFCP) stable and effective at every school in the state led the Connecticut State Department of Education (SDE) to embark on a pilot project to develop and study a district-level approach to forming such partnerships and tying their work to student learning and success. State education officials undertook this project based on research that showed that partnership programs at individual schools may disintegrate without committed district leaders and school staffs that can withstand leadership lapses and turnover of key staff or parent leaders.

The two-year project involved three districts and several partners. The districts, Groton, Middletown, and Windsor, were chosen because each already had a record of successfully implementing the Action Team for Partnerships (ATP) model in a few of their schools. In these districts, over two years, the pilot program reached 24 schools and nearly 11,000 students.

Joining the SDE were the State Education Resource Center (SERC), Connecticut Parents Plus at the United Way, and the Capitol Region Education Council (CREC). A grant from Connecticut Parents Plus, the state's Parent Information and Resource Center (PIRC), paid for most of the \$55,000 cost of the pilot, with in-kind support coming from SDE and SERC.

The state partners signed an agreement with each district. In it, the state team agreed to supply the following support: (1) a state team liaison assigned to each district; (2) training for district facilitators; (3) development of a district

leadership team; (4) formation of school-based ATPs; and (5) periodic meetings with district facilitators.

In return, the districts agreed to (1) assign one person, at least half-time, to work as the district facilitator; (2) participate in training; and (3) attend bimonthly meetings of district facilitators.

The schools, too, made commitments. Each school is required to (1) form an ATP; (2) write a comprehensive, goal-oriented One-Year Action Plan linked to school improvement goals; (3) create committees to increase the number and kinds of partnership activities to reach all families in ways that promote student success; and (4) use evaluation tools and surveys from NNPS to monitor the quality of the program.

Each district took a different approach, and each had different results. Here are a few examples:

**Groton** – Within a year, Groton's District Quality Council (DQC), with two added coordinators, trained ATPs in every school. The partnership plans were tied to school improvement goals and are integral to the district's strategic plan. Schools developed a variety of creative, interactive programs that showed parents and teachers they can work together to support student achievement.

**Middletown** – The district team focused on changing the definition of parent involvement. "Just as we have a math or writing curriculum, we now have a parent involvement curriculum, tying parent participation to school goals and student achievement,"

said a parent resource coordinator. The district team is encouraging school ATPs to work on bridging the communication gap between parents and teachers. Among the successful programs are Literacy Nights, which offer families suggestions for helping their children at home. The resulting growth of reading and writing achievement has led to similar events at many other schools.

**Windsor** – Engaging hard-to-reach families was one of the school board’s goals, which overlapped with the goals of the district’s SFCP team. That group wanted to make families more aware of the importance of literacy and the link between literacy and school achievement. The family resource centers in each elementary school provided activities for parents who wanted to help their children at home.

The three districts also identified challenges:

- All three had some difficulty defining district-level goals and strategies. The concept of a district team was new to these leaders and it was, initially, unclear how the district teams could help individual schools meet their needs while “institutionalizing” SFCP throughout the district.
- It was difficult to explain the connection between SFCP and school improvement, especially in schools that already had school improvement plans or were undergoing some other reform.
- Two of the three districts had turnover in significant positions in the district and in schools. In both cases, the assistant superintendent was the key to keeping the project on track.

The SDE contracted with an external evaluator to assess the pilot program on several variables: key events and activities, state team supports and resources that were most helpful to the district, the elements of district leadership that support successful SFCP, and the impact of each district’s SFCP efforts. This evaluation found that district accomplishments included: implementation of district plans, district support and accountability, increased visibility for partnerships, new ATPs, and innovative funding for partnerships. The state team’s accomplishments included: providing assistance considered valuable to districts, tailoring ATP training to district needs, and connecting districts with outside resources and expertise.

The results of the pilot project with three districts, however, are not yet definitive on “the relative benefits of a district-level vs. school-by-school approach,” according to a state leader for partnerships. They applied to renew the initial grant for three more years to support the three pilot districts for another year and add new districts over the next three years, for a total of eight districts and approximately 200 schools.

“Our goal is capacity building in districts and schools to help them help parents support children’s education. Developing local infrastructure, attitudes, and strategies will ensure that the districts and their schools are able to sustain partnerships with parents when the state project ends,” concluded the leader of the Connecticut project.

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