

Initial Committee

Staff members who served on the committee charged with addressing the School Board's Program of Work relative to this research and the supporting plan are:

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Contributors to the Action Plan for Removing Barriers to Parental Involvement

This is a preliminary plan that will be presented in coming weeks to all principals and selected teachers for further refinement. The Department of Media and Communications Development would like to acknowledge the following individuals for their contributions to the plan as it stands now:

Larry Ames, *principal, Seatack Elementary School*

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ACTION PLAN: Removing Barriers to Parent Involvement in Virginia Beach City Public Schools



Submitted to the School Board of the City of Virginia Beach

June 5, 2007

Prepared by the Department of Media and Communications Development

Background



In August of 2006 the Virginia Beach School Board held its annual retreat for the purpose of shaping its work plan for the 2006-07 school year. This plan, known as School Board Program of Work for School Year 2006-07, was printed and distributed within the local community and is now posted on vbschools.com, the school division's Web site. The plan addresses seven strategic goals, one of which is "Meaningful Involvement of Community, Parents and Partners." Under that goal, school administration was charged by the Board with meeting several objectives, including the following:

- *To conduct a gap analysis (survey) to determine real versus perceived levels of parental engagement.*
- *To complete a survey to include principals, PTA and community members that identifies barriers which under-served populations encounter that make it difficult for them to be involved in public education.*
- *To develop a plan to remove barriers and enhance communications with under-served segments of the community.*

The Department of Media and Communications Development (MCD), the school system agency charged with developing strategies to address these objectives, subsequently contracted with Issues and Answers, a Virginia Beach market research firm, to conduct the above-mentioned gap analysis/survey(s). Goals of these surveys were: 1) to identify the characteristics of under-served populations; 2) identify barriers to parental involvement; and 3) identify parental involvement and communications strategies that are proving effective.

The results of that market research have been delivered to MCD and a parent communications/involvement plan developed in response to the data. This plan was subsequently presented to principals and to a sampling of teachers for further input.

Strategic Communications

Working to strengthen parental engagement

Research indicates that when parents and families are involved in their children's education the chances of student academic success are greatly improved. Realizing this fact, Virginia Beach City Public Schools is committed to maintaining an ambitious program of parental and community involvement. Some of its successful elements are:

- **The operation of a comprehensive Volunteer in Education Program** conducted in cooperation with the Virginia Beach Council of PTAs. Approximately 20,000 volunteers donated more than 500,000 hours of service last year, conservatively valued at \$9 million.

What the Gap Analysis Tells Us

The research conducted by Issues and Answers tells us that there is a gap between how parents perceive their own involvement and how educators perceive parent involvement. Not surprisingly, parents characterize their involvement to be at a higher level than teachers and principals do. It appears that all three groups may have different definitions of "parental involvement" and perhaps different expectations about how that involvement can best be carried out.

Much of this gap can be closed by fostering a better understanding between the home and the school. This is not a simple task that can be accomplished by implementing a few strategies. Real improvement comes with **strengthened connections**. The strategies that are outlined in this plan are designed to strengthen these communications. However, there is an important philosophical foundation to this plan: Essentially we as school personnel, whether at the district level or the school level, must recognize a need to redefine our approaches to involvement, concentrating largely on ways to provide parents assistance in overcoming obstacles, thus allowing them to work more effectively with us on behalf of their children.

The authors of this plan realize that the most meaningful progress will be made in individual school buildings. However, at the district level there is a responsibility to cultivate a **culture of reaching out**. The school system can do its part to encourage this environment by putting in place systems and resources that help foster those connections. Many of these have been discussed specifically in this plan. It is believed that school system leadership can thoughtfully cultivate that culture of reaching out—specifically through articulated expectations, training, program evaluation and celebration of successes. Consequently, this plan must be recognized for what it is -- a framework for fostering consistent and ongoing efforts to forge meaningful partnerships between the home and the school.



Budgetary Considerations

Most of the recommendations in this plan can largely be accomplished without additional funding. However, notable exceptions include the purchase of a parent notification service and a fee for additional schools becoming part of the National Network of Partnership Schools. A parent notification service is not inexpensive, but high-profile emergencies in the educational arena have driven home the need for such outreaches. The capability of these services to meet individual school communications needs and district needs expediently make them powerful tools. Funding for a service was not included in the FY 2007-08 budget. However, school system leadership has committed to reviewing the budget to revisit priorities so funding can be secured. The fee for participation in the National Network of Partnership Schools is \$100 per school initially. However, schools that participate in the organization's data collection are not assessed a fee after the initial year of participation.

CAPITALIZING ON ELECTRONIC COMMUNICATIONS *continued*

- Encourage each school to promote its school's Web site as a valuable resource for parents and students.
- Continue to monitor *vbschools.com* through surveys, software and user input to ensure the school division's Web site serves as a valuable resource.
- Require all schools to publish an electronic newsletter on their school's Web site in addition to the printed copies they distribute.
- Create opportunities for two-way communication on every school Web site.
- Explore the possibilities of pod casting important messages to parents via each school's Web site.
- Encourage schools to incorporate audio/video webcasts via school Web sites.

Improving District-wide Communications

Parents ranked the *Apple-A-Day* newsletter and other printed material as the number one way they are currently receiving district-wide information and further indicated that these printed vehicles were their preference for receiving information. However, they also pointed to *vbschools x-tra*, the district's listserv subscription service, as the most effective way to receive communications from the district. Our interpretation of this data is that while electronic communication is the most effective way to receive fast-breaking, urgent or important news, information that is comprehensive in nature appears to be best delivered in a print format. In addition, the district's Web site, *vbschools.com*, also ranked high as a source for important district information and this is a resource that can be maximized to meet both needs – expediency and comprehensive information.



Following are recommendations designed to improve district-wide communications:

- The institution of a parent notification service to communicate with parents is a best practice among school divisions. Virginia Beach is one of the few school districts in the region without such a service. Unlike *vbschools.com*, which is a self-subscribing service, a rapid notification service would allow the school division to manage in a methodical manner an e-mail/phone service that is capable of delivering up to 6,000 calls per minute to parents. While emergency communications has been their impetus, school systems and individual schools use such services for other important/good news as well and have also used them to reach under-served audiences such as non-English speaking parents.,
- Convene focus groups comprising parents to obtain qualitative input about *Apple-a-Day*. We need to ask them: Are we publishing the kinds of stories you find interesting? Is our publication easy to read? How frequently should we publish?
- *vbschools x-tra* has been found to be highly effective. However, since users must subscribe to the service themselves, it is not as all-permeating as is needed. Therefore, it is recommended that the emergency information cards parents are required to complete at the beginning of each school year be adapted to include parent e-mail addresses and that these addresses be transferred into the *vbschools x-tra* database, specifically in the categories that are used in an emergency: School Closings, Cancellations and Emergencies and News Releases. Down the road, as the district begins activating a parent notification system, some differentiation will need to take place between *vbschools x-tra* and the new service. This collection of e-mail addresses will be a necessity in both cases.

- **A volunteer certification program** designed to train volunteer coordinators on coordination and management of individual school volunteer efforts. To date more than 100 volunteers have been trained to become VBCPS Certified Volunteer Coordinators.
- **A National Network of Partnership Schools initiative** that involves 39 schools developing action plans that are aligned with school goals and dedicated to improving parental involvement. These teams have been trained by staff from Johns Hopkins University. This parent involvement initiative has been expanded since its inception to address the needs of populations that might traditionally have difficulty becoming involved in school (such as military and single parent families).
- **A highly successful Partners in Education program**, featuring more than 2,100 formal partnerships with business, civic, faith-based, education, military and governmental organizations.
- **The Virginia Beach Education Foundation** which provided \$112,000 in teacher and school-wide grants to 200 teachers for worthy academic endeavors for the 2006-07 school year.
- Implementation of a school-based listserv called *MySchoolMail* that serves as a resource for participating schools to use in communicating important school news to subscribers.
- Maintaining an active listserv at the district level (**Vbschools x-tra**) that presently provides 30,000-plus subscribers with important and timely messages.
- The presence of **87 school/center Web sites** which serve as a means for parents to obtain school news, review student assignments and contact teachers via e-mail.



And yet despite a highly organized, systemic approach to parent and community involvement the overriding question remains: **How can the district improve its present-day reality especially with those parents who, for various reasons, experience barriers to involvement in public education in Virginia Beach?**

The research executed by Issues and Answers has identified some significant challenges ahead for Virginia Beach City Public Schools central and school administrations. Some of the findings are confirmations of what we anecdotally held to be true. For example, those parents who reported the most difficulty getting involved in their children's education are those who have significant socioeconomic challenges, are more likely to be transient households, and are more likely to be single parent and/or minority families. Obviously, elements of this plan must be focused on reaching out to these families, helping them to overcome the challenges they face in supporting their children's experiences in schools.

The research also indicated a strong desire from parents overall for more direct communication from and with their children's schools. Face-to-face communication appears to be regarded as a connecting force and is widely accepted as the most effective means of communication. For families experiencing significant socioeconomic challenges, however, face-to-face contact can be difficult if their time constraints are considerable or if they find the educational environment intimidating. It appears that schools may need to redefine how to best make those face-to-face connections with parents who cannot necessarily "come to them." In addition, another very interesting finding for district officials was the indication that parents regard electronic communications as the most effective way to communicate with schools.

These findings drew the authors of this plan to a two-prong approach: 1) To develop strategies designed to strengthen and increase the opportunities for parent-school contact; and 2) Increase efforts to communicate electronically. It appears that in today's busy, time-starved world, electronic communications is highly effective, largely because it offers speed and timeliness for parents seeking important information about their children's academic and social progress.

Removing Barriers

Issues and Answers' research cited the top five barriers to parental involvement as: 1) time; 2) other family responsibilities; 3) working more than one job/work schedules; 4) schools not being responsive to parents' concerns; and 5) transportation. Some of these barriers are going to be more difficult for schools and the district to overcome because they are indicative of individual family circumstances and are outside of educators' purviews.

However, difficult does not mean impossible. Therefore, key to overcoming some of these barriers is for schools to employ strategies that research has indicated are effective. National research conducted by Johns Hopkins National Network of Partnership Schools tells us that schools need to redefine their expectations to include less traditional forms of volunteerism and parental involvement, such as offering parents ways to help out from home, providing volunteer opportunities that better match parents' schedules, and using electronic communications to strengthen connections.

The authors of this plan want to make it clear that Virginia Beach schools are already working successfully to engage parents and their efforts have reaped great benefits. But a hallmark of this district is continuous improvement and that is what this plan is all about. To effect meaningful change, the district must work to create an even stronger culture of engagement. A highly effective way to bring this about is through sustained communication and training. Therefore, the following recommendations are proffered:

- As part of the new Professional Development Program (PDP) include parental engagement training for teachers as an approved class. While we realize that PDP has been reserved for strategies that improve students' academic achievement, we maintain that national research confirms that parental involvement is a strong factor in that regard. (Note: One principal, when asked for input on this plan, voiced the opinion that first-year teachers should be required to take parental engagement training.)
- Brief principals on the results of this research so they can make thoughtful adjustments to their own parental involvement plans. For example, transportation has been identified as a significant barrier. Perhaps more schools might be encouraged to offer transportation to their events; plan events that take place in the neighborhoods, civic leagues

and churches; or develop a program of parental contact that works outside of conventional school hours.

- Make the back-to-school issues of *Apple-A-Day* and *Kaleidoscope* parental involvement issues. The former publication would highlight the many ways parents can get involved with their children's schools while the latter would encourage teachers to make parental involvement a reality by highlighting the work of teachers who have employed successful parent involvement strategies.
- Consider mandating or at least strongly encouraging schools to participate in the National Network of Partnership Schools initiative. Presently, Title 1 schools must participate in this initiative along with middle and high schools that did not make Adequate Yearly Progress. This research-based outreach was developed by Dr. Joyce Epstein from Johns Hopkins University. It encourages schools to develop parent involvement strategies that meet specific schools goals and that are aligned with need. The program is built around six types of parent involvement: parenting, communicating, volunteering, learning at home, decision making, and collaborating with the community. This framework has been endorsed by the National PTA and is aligned with *No Child Left Behind* parent involvement requirements.
- Encourage principals to establish an expectation that all parent inquiries will be addressed within a stipulated time frame (24 to 48 hours). Many of the complaints that are addressed to central office are because parents felt they had to wait too long to "get an answer" to their questions/concerns. The research conducted by Issues and Answers indicated that while 97 percent of teachers felt encouragement from principals to communicate with parents, only 75 percent felt their school had clear expectations on how to do so. In fact, 63 percent of the parents identified in the Issues and Answers survey as "under-served" indicated that none of their children's teachers had communicated with them on how and when to best contact them.
- Assess principal/teacher interest in a workshop on how to develop an effective newsletter. Since parents identified school newsletters as an important source of information, it is essential

that newsletters remain up-to-date and contain useful information presented in an "easy to understand" format. Also, it is recommended that principals involve parents in the planning process or seek feedback to ensure newsletter content is relevant. Creating two-way communication formats in newsletters is also advisable such as a section that encourages parent ideas or suggestions.

- Develop a plan to more effectively market *Teacher Communications Toolbox* and *Principal Communications Toolbox* to staff, including investigating the feasibility of presenting at the Teacher Orientation & Continuous Learning Institute (TOCLI). These resources are available on the Intranet (vbcp.com).
- Investigate the need to support mentor teachers in promoting best practices in parent involvement/communications to mentees and protégé teachers.
- Investigate the feasibility of adding a parent communication component to the annual Administrators' Conference.
- Market more aggressively the district's volunteer certification program.

Capitalizing on Electronic Communications

The market research conducted by Issues and Answers revealed that parents characterized e-mail communication with teachers as the most effective communications strategy. It is apparent that electronic communications is becoming increasingly important to parents. Therefore, it is incumbent upon the district and individual schools to maximize their electronic communications efforts. The following are recommendations in that regard:

- Require that all schools employ the use of the *MySchoolMail* listserv function and supply them the tools/strategies to promote the resource to parents. At present, 47 of 87 schools have an account for this service and are using this function for PTA news and information about special events and programs.
 - Work with schools to market the *MySchoolMail* feature to ensure widespread parent subscriptions.
 - Require all schools to provide parents with a comprehensive listing of staff e-mail addresses, either by posting the information on the school Web site and/or providing a printed roster.
 - Work with the Department of Technology to develop a rollout plan for a division-wide approach to teacher Web pages.
 - Support the Department of Technology as personnel develop a strategy for enabling parental online access to grades.
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- Investigate the feasibility of developing "front office training" to help ensure that parents visiting or volunteering in their children's schools encounter a welcoming and receptive environment.
- Interview teachers individually or convene a teacher focus group comprising personnel from schools with a high incidence of "underserved" populations, and identify successful strategies that are being used. Promote these individual success stories division-wide.
- Take advantage of existing pockets of access such as homeless services, the *Military Child Initiative* and the Virginia Beach Education Foundation mini grant program to establish/refine/increase linkages with under-served populations.
- Share the survey results with Virginia Beach Council of PTAs and collaborate with its leadership on effective training for the organization's spring and fall leadership training. Assist in promoting the PTA's *Three for Me* program which asks parents for a commitment of three volunteer hours per year at their children's schools.