

## In this chapter, we

- offer strategies for family engagement that can be integrated into the curriculum and flow of the classroom day, as well as into the organizational structure and traditions of your school
- offer models from schools, including those where we've held leadership roles, to consider how others have brought concerns for equity and commitment to their particular communities and situations.

## A Principal's Story

I walked the halls late one spring with a staff member of an elementary school where I soon would be taking over as principal. I had just been hired, and it had been years since my previous principalship—years spent in many schools, coaching and consulting and leading workshops and family forums. Over some twenty years, I had learned a lot by being in so many different schools, but I also knew I had a lot to figure out about the school into which I was stepping. There had been quite a large hiring committee, but I felt that families were under-represented both in number and in representation of various cultural segments of the community, half of whose families were living below the poverty line.

The school had experienced a rapid turnover in principals during the previous decade. The hiring committee had told me their first priority was school climate and culture. Family participation was low and student behavior was troubling. Teachers were dedicated, but they were weary of one- or two-year leaders and wary of new initiatives.

I asked the teacher I was walking with, “When do families find out what class their children are in next year? Do they already know?” The teacher explained that teachers made step-up recommendations about children they had taught in the current year to the next grade-level teachers, who met with them and then divided the students into classes to create an academic and behavioral balance and mix of students in each classroom. The principal had a final look, and class lists were posted on the

doors of the school at some point during the summer. I filed that information away as we continued our tour of the building.

During my five-year tenure as principal of the school, we didn't do all we could have to fully engage families in the school, but we worked at it steadily as a community and through procedural changes. We developed useful approaches to turning a school toward being the learning village it needs to be. I'll come back to these approaches later in the chapter.

Doubtless, you have many local traditions, special events, and daily practices that help involve families in the life of your school. As you read this chapter, take time to consider what might broaden participation at your school and to think about the part you might play in making this happen.

## Starting Points

How might you best approach your ongoing work with your school families? According to the authors of *Beyond the Bake Sale: The Essential Guide to Family-School Partnerships*, the answer depends on where your school is currently in partnering with families.<sup>1</sup>

We've included a useful rubric from *Beyond the Bake Sale* (see page 166 in Resources) to help you consider your school's efforts. The rubric is clear, focusing on five areas: Building Relationships; Linking to Learning; Addressing Differences; Supporting Advocacy; and Sharing Power. Your assessment of your school from your perspective, as well as from those of families and school staff, will likely tell you a lot. I wish I had come across this book before we started working on increasing family-school engagement at my school!

Teaching for equity in our classrooms and schools requires communicating our commitment to each family of the students we teach. We do not know whether there is a moment of realization for each family that a school really cares about them and their children's needs. Furthermore, mutual engagement between school and home cannot guarantee positive results in academic and social growth for every single child. But we know from studies and our own experience that the more frequently

positive and meaningful exchanges occur between school personnel and family members, the better for young learners.<sup>2</sup> It's logical to extend the personalized learning that we facilitate in the classroom to significant, personalized communication with families.

First, let's look at what teachers can do in their relationships with families, followed by a broader examination of opportunities for other school personnel.

## **Approaches to Personalized Family Communication with Teachers**

Here are six interrelated approaches for teachers and administrators to consider:

1. Goal-setting conferences between families and teachers before school begins
2. Recognition of student growth
3. Student-teacher check-ins
4. Yes! cards to families
5. Additional family-focused conferences during the school year
6. Keeping report cards in perspective.