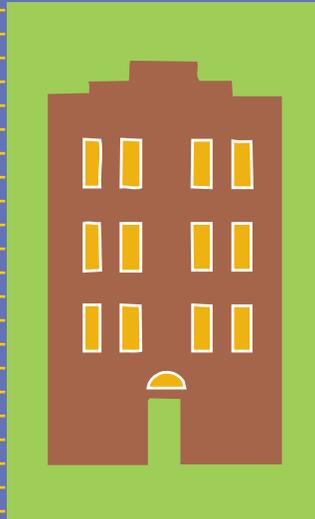


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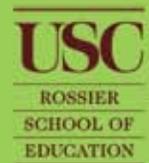
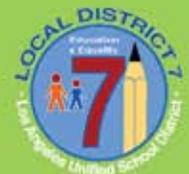
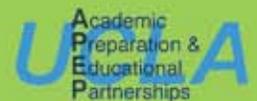
COLLABORATION IN LOS ANGELES COUNTY



Engaging Parents as Partners in Creating
College Going Cultures:
Developing Parent Centers with a
Strong Academic, College Focus

A PRACTICAL GUIDE

Melissa Friedman MacDonald and Aimée Dorr, UCLA
March 2008



Los Angeles County
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Engaging Parents as Partners in Creating College Going Cultures: Developing Parent Centers with a Strong Academic, College Focus

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Preparing students for college is a complicated process that involves multiple stakeholders at the school site and also in the home and community. In addition to teachers and counselors, parents are a pivotal part of a student's college trajectory. It is for this reason that promoting parental involvement in the college process continues to be an important focus for schools. Parent centers located at the school site can be very effective in increasing parental engagement in students' academic life, particularly as it relates to preparing for higher education.

Traditionally, parent centers have tended to be more of a social space for networking. However, schools are now realizing that parent centers hold tremendous promise as vehicles for educating parents about informed participation in their child's college pathway. Prepared as part of the *Building Educational Success Through (BEST) Collaboration in Los Angeles County* initiative, this report is intended to serve as a resource and practical guide for educators and parents who are in the process of improving existing parent centers and/or for those who are developing models for a future parent center. More information on the *BEST Collaboration in Los Angeles County* initiative and other relevant publications released by the initiative can be found at <http://apep-bestla.gseis.ucla.edu/>.

The content of this report is drawn primarily from the November 1, 2007 *BEST* conference, "Engaging Parents as Partners in Creating College Going Cultures: Developing Parent Centers with a Strong Academic, College Focus." Conference participants from five successful partnerships of school districts and institutions of higher education across LA County and from the Los Angeles County Office of Education provided information about existing parent centers, plans for future parent center development, and resources for parent center work. Representatives from four regional parent centers presented detailed descriptions of the working models behind each center's operations. Synthesized in this guide, these resources offer a wealth of information, practical tips, and important considerations for those interested in developing parent centers with a strong academic, college focus.

Parent Centers as Vehicles for Empowering Parent Participation in the College Process

Building and sustaining a parent center with a strong academic, college focus is a multifaceted process that involves both parents and school staff. Building relationships with parents and creating a welcoming atmosphere are critical precursors to establishing an effective parent center. In order for parents to become actively involved in their child's college trajectory, they must acquire knowledge and have access to resources about how best to be involved.

- ❖ *Parent centers that provide college resources, information, and meaningful educational opportunities for parents are most successful in empowering parents to become involved in their child's process of preparing to go to college.*

In general, informed parents are more involved parents. Parent centers can play a pivotal role in teaching parents how to become college coaches for their children.

Key Considerations and Practical Strategies for Developing a Parent Center Focused on Academics and College Going

Create an Attainable Action Plan with Measurable Outcomes

Establishing a parent center with a strong academic, college focus involves planning, assessment, and ongoing adjustments. In order to effectively engage in these tasks, an action plan must be developed. Representatives from all major stakeholder groups (e.g., parents, administrators, teachers, counselors) should be involved in this process.

Strategies for creating an action plan include:

- ❖ Agreeing on a specific vision statement to guide the daily and long-term operations of the parent center
- ❖ Setting reasonable goals that have measurable outcomes
- ❖ Developing a mechanism for evaluating progress, one that includes identifying what data would need to be collected, how to collect these data, and how to analyze the data so that the results can guide decision making about practice
- ❖ Using the data to revisit parent center programs and make appropriate adjustments as indicated by the data
- ❖ Researching other parent centers in order to determine how (if at all) their models can inform the action plan content

Determine Parents' Needs and Interests

Ensuring that resources and activities are relevant to parents is an important first step toward creating an effective academic, college-focused parent center. Instead of a top-down approach toward developing parent programs and educational materials, school staff should adopt a bottom-up approach and ask parents directly what they would like to know about the college process. Allowing parents themselves to identify the types of knowledge and skills they need will likely increase parental involvement in the parent center and the usefulness of whatever information and activities the center provides.

Strategies for determining parents' needs and interests include:

- ❖ Developing a questionnaire that asks parents to provide specific information about what they already know and would like to know about college eligibility requirements, admissions procedures, and financial aid
- ❖ Holding focus groups that provide parents with the opportunity to voice their concerns and ask their questions
- ❖ Utilizing the information provided by parents in the questionnaire or focus groups to plan and implement a series of educational programs that address their needs and interests

Create a Resource Rich, Welcoming Environment for Parents

Parent centers should be a place where all parents feel welcome and comfortable. In addition to creating an inviting atmosphere, parent centers should also provide meaningful resources for parents to educate themselves about how to become a college advocate and advisor for their child. Achieving both of these goals requires collaboration from different stakeholders at the school site.

Strategies for creating a resource rich, welcoming parent center include:

- ❖ Ensuring that the parent center attends to parents' language capabilities and needs by providing, as needed, translated materials and translation services at events
- ❖ Extending to parents personal invitations to events, whenever possible utilizing, for example, the parent center liaison and/or involved parents to make calls on a telephone in the parent center
- ❖ Asking parents to sign in and provide their contact information for a contact list that parents can use regularly to communicate with one another and share knowledge obtained through parent center resources and programs
- ❖ Providing relevant information (e.g., testing, admissions deadlines) to parents in a timely manner and in accessible language through monthly newsletters and bulletins on the school web site
- ❖ Keeping the parent center open in the evening so that parents who cannot come during the day can also access the center's resources and programs
- ❖ Inviting other existing college preparatory programs, in the community or at colleges and universities, to visit the parent center and provide information

Provide Technology Access and Education

Technology is now a gatekeeper to higher education and parents benefit from having the knowledge and skills to use technology to access information about colleges and universities, the application process, and financial aid. For this reason, college-focused parent centers should promote informed computer/internet access and use.

Strategies for providing access to technology and relevant education include:

- ❖ Having computers with internet access available for use in the parent center
- ❖ Holding evening and weekend, as well as weekday, computer classes to teach parents the following:
 - How to use the computer and navigate the web, plus how to access and use the school web site, college and university web sites, and the FAFSA web site
 - How to set up and maintain an email account
 - How to find information about discounts and vouchers for purchasing computers and obtaining internet access
- ❖ Utilizing already created technology lessons for parents (e.g., AVID’s Spanish and English guided internet lessons about the FAFSA process and college application processes for community colleges, CSUs, private colleges and universities, and UCs)
- ❖ Providing information about technology resources in public libraries, community centers, and the like

Pressing Issues for Parent Centers

In addition to the practical suggestions described in previous sections, participants from the November 2007 “Engaging Parents as Partners in Creating College Going Cultures: Developing Parent Centers with a Strong Academic, College Focus” conference also identified particular challenges in doing parent center work. The needs described in this section represent broader issues that merit special attention when creating and improving parent center models.

Important needs frequently experienced by parent centers include:

- ❖ Developing a stronger link between the parent center and the college center at the school site so that the former benefits from the latter, regardless of physical distance between them and the degree of teacher involvement in them
- ❖ Building connections with other parent and college centers throughout the district or region in order to increase the resources available to all parents
- ❖ Creating parent programs that are inclusive of and welcoming to all parent groups, regardless of any tensions that may exist between different groups of parents
- ❖ Raising funds to supplement those the school or district makes available for parent center resources and activities

Four Working Models of Parent Centers in Los Angeles County

In seeking to understand parent center work, it is useful to review examples of actual parent centers in action. Such examples can provide concrete illustrations of how a parent center is designed, operated, and improved. The four parent center models presented in this section are those that hosted roundtable discussions at the November 2007 “Engaging Parents as Partners in Creating College Going Cultures: Developing Parent Centers with a Strong Academic, College Focus” conference.

The four parent centers were chosen for roundtables based on reputation and recommendation by conference steering committee members. The centers range in their developmental status with some well established and others just getting started. Taken together, they illustrate the complicated process involved in creating and implementing high quality parent centers with a strong academic, college focus. The descriptions that follow are syntheses of the information contained in handouts provided by parent center representatives at the November 2007 event.

Elizabeth Learning Center

Elizabeth Learning Center (ELC) is a model site for the Urban Learning Centers (ULC), one of the eight designs of the New American Schools of the 21st Century. ELC is located in the city of Cudahy and a part of the Los Angeles Unified School District. The center serves over 2,700 students (preK-12th grade). The vision of ELC is “to enable all children to learn by addressing their educational, social, and mental health needs in a comprehensive and integrated manner in collaboration with public, private, and civic partners.”

The center has extended hours four days a week, operating from 7:00 am to 9:00 pm. It is managed by a team of four Community Representatives who are paid for fifteen hours per week. These staff members oversee the daily operations of the center and also serve as liaisons between the school and the surrounding community. Collaborating with teachers to recruit students and parents is a regular part of the staffs’ job, and all new recruits receive welcome kits.

Unpaid parent volunteers are an important part of daily center functioning. Among other things, these volunteers help with fundraising for the center and with educating and mentoring other parents. One parent volunteer is in charge of organizing all parents. A birthday calendar is maintained for all parent volunteers so that they can receive cards and phone calls on their birthday. This type of personal treatment is what helps retain parent volunteers.

Other important components of ELC are its comprehensive adult education program and its childcare program. Nearly 1,000 adults participate in the diverse classes (e.g., computers, English as a Second Language) offered at the center between the hours of 7:30 am and 9:00 pm. The on-campus childcare program is run by parent volunteers, and parents attending classes can utilize the child care for the cost of \$2 a day. These features surely help make ELC and its parent center an attractive, valued environment for parents.

For more information about ELC and its parent center, please contact Monica Rios at monica.rios@lausd.net or visit the ELC web site at www.eslc.k12.ca.us/homepage.htm.

Fremont High School Parent Center

The Fremont High School (FHS) Parent Center has been in existence for many years and has a long history of involving parents in school events. The center is highly collaborative and actively seeks to partner with the school college center and other community programs. In fact, much of the information about the CSU and UC course-taking (A-G) requirements, college applications, and financial aid is available to parents in the college center.

Currently, the center is managed by Lisa Thompson, a Parent Liaison. She was selected by parent representatives and is in charge of all daily operations. Her primary role is to seek out and provide resources that allow parents to help their children gain entry to a university, college, or community college.

Unpaid parent volunteers are an essential part of the FHS Parent Center. Current volunteers work with Ms. Thompson to call other parents and/or stop them in the school hallways to invite them to center sponsored events. The high level of parent retention is attributed to the center's welcoming environment and an ongoing effort to create activities based on parents' needs and interests.

The FHS Parent Center offers many different types of classes ranging from sewing and technology to Spanish language courses. The educational program is currently under revision, and there are plans to expand the classes offered to parents. In addition to adult learning opportunities, the center provides parents with information about different types of resources (e.g., job services, health clinics) available to them in the local community. The FHS Parent Center is funded through private donations from parents and local neighborhood vendors. This funding is used to purchase materials and food for events.

For more information about the Fremont High School Parent Center, please contact Lisa Thompson at lisa.thompson@lausd.net or Kelly Bedford at kelly.bedford@lausd.net.

Hawthorne High School Parent Center

The Hawthorne High School (HHS) Parent Center opened on March 10, 2007. It is the result of the Program Improvement IV Restructuring-Reform Plan. Every stakeholder group in the school community from teachers to parents was included in the development process.

The HHS Parent Center is still in the beginning phases of its development. Parents are learning how to use the center and are taking advantage of the classes being offered. Examples of current courses include computer awareness and usage, connecting with the internet, and troubled teen parenting strategy sessions. The HHS Parent Center is not currently connected with the college and career center on campus, but plans are underway for such a collaboration.

A Title I Community Liaison manages the Parent Center in conjunction with a team of parent volunteers. Parent volunteers play an important role in running and improving the Center. They designed a resource area for parents (complete with college information), assist with translating for parents and teachers, work the phone banks to contact parents, and supervise children while parents attend meetings and workshops.

For more information about the Hawthorne High School Parent Center, please contact Principal Joy Bramlette at 310.263.4402.

South Gate High School Parent Center

South Gate High School (SGHS) is located in southeast Los Angeles County and serves a predominantly Latina/o student population. Created on campus in 1991, the SGHS Parent Center began as a space for parents to discuss concerns and issues regarding their children's school experiences. It receives its funding from multiple sources including state and federal grants and parent fundraisers. Within the last couple of years, the Parent Center has become a central place on campus for college preparation and education about eligibility requirements, admissions, and financial aid.

A Community Liaison manages the Parent Center and is selected by a committee of parents. This committee develops the protocol for all interviews and is entirely responsible for the hiring process. Unpaid parent volunteers are important at the SGHS Parent Center and are recruited by parents currently active in the center. These parents post flyers at school and in the community and make personal phone calls to uninvolved parents, inviting them to attend Parent Center programs. It is the safe and welcoming environment of the Parent Center, in addition to incentives such as raffles for Disneyland tickets, that helps retain parent volunteers.

Educational workshops for parents are a large part of the work of the SGHS Parent Center. Workshops are created based on parent interests as expressed in parent surveys sent home each year. The facilitators for these workshops are parents themselves. Parent leadership training is provided in order to help parents navigate the K-12 education system. Workshops teach parents about curriculum, standards, assessment and evaluation, and educational policies that govern the school system. The sessions are intended to empower parents to become advocates for their children, particularly with respect to preparing for college. The SGHS Parent Center also connects parents with useful resources and social services in the neighboring community.

For more information about the South Gate High School Parent Center, please contact Mary Johnson at mjadvocate2004@yahoo.com.

Conclusion

This resource guide has presented important practical information about how to develop and maintain parent centers with a strong academic, college focus. In addition, critical issues facing those doing parent center work were identified. Four examples of parent centers in action throughout Los Angeles County were provided as a means of illustrating different parent center models in various stages of development. As a whole, this practical guide is meant to serve as a useful resource for all educators, researchers, and parents interested in establishing effective parent centers and/or improving existing parent centers, particularly as they help parents ensure that their children are prepared to go to college.

Appendix

Existing Resources and Programs for Parents and for Schools Interested in Supporting Parents

Padres Promotores de la Educación

The parent promoters, or “Padres Promotores de la Educación,” actively link parents to school services and deliver information on higher education to the community through non-traditional methods such as home visits, existing neighborhood associations, and informal educational dialogues. The program began January 2002 and is being administered by Santa Ana College. All nine Santa Ana Unified School District middle schools and four comprehensive high schools are participating in the program.

Parents have created a curriculum that includes topics such as high school graduation requirements, university entrance requirements, AB540, financial aid, and determining student GPA. These lessons follow a simple template that can be followed with minimal preparation and is available in English and Spanish.

Further Information:

For more information about Padres Promotores de la Educación, contact Santa Ana College Dean of Student Affairs, Lilia Tanakeyowma at 714.564.6970 or via email at tanakeyowma_lilia@sac.edu.

Parent Academy (Los Angeles County Office of Education)

Created by the Los Angeles County Office of Education (LACOE), the Parent Academy provides training, resources, and information to further academic achievement and parent/child/school success and to support parents as leaders for effective school-site parent involvement as required by No Child Left Behind. All presentations are conducted at the school site, are available in English and Spanish, and cover a wide range of topics including College for Success 1& 2, Parents Working with Parents, Parents as First and Most Important Teachers, STAR, Standards, and More, and Helping with Homework.

Further Information:

For more information and a complete list of Parent Academy presentations, contact Ignacio Rojas, Jr., Program Coordinator, by telephone at 562.922.6505 or 1.800.219.4000 or via email at rojas_ignacio@lacoed.edu.

Parent Collaborative (Los Angeles Unified School District Parent Community Services Branch)

The Parent Collaborative is a product of the Los Angeles Unified School District’s Parent Community Services Branch (PCSB). The mission of PCSB is to promote increased student academic achievement by building the capacities of local schools and communities to train, educate, and support parents as

partners in their children's education. Some PCSB services include providing parents with information on District instructional programs, publishing a Parent Press newsletter, and facilitating the District-wide annual Parent Summit.

The purpose of the Parent Collaborative is to bring together parent representatives from the Local Districts and organizations that show a common purpose and commitment to public education and the health and welfare of all children in the Los Angeles Unified School District. Some of the many responsibilities of the Parent Collaborative include holding regular meetings, providing parent training and awareness through parent conferences, and highlighting the best practices for parental involvement in the Parent Press newsletter.

Further Information:

For more information about the Parent Collaborative and/or PCSB please email Christopher Downing at Christopher.downing@lausd.net or call 1.866.669.7272.

Parent Involvement Program (Los Angeles County Office of Education)

The vision of the Parent Involvement Program (PIP), developed by the Los Angeles County Office of Education (LACOE), is to raise the awareness of the critical role that all parents play in the academic success of their children and to reinforce the importance of collaborative partnerships among schools, families, and communities. PIP seeks to build district and school capacity to increase and sustain parent involvement. As part of this program, experienced Parent Education Specialists from LACOE will facilitate trainings on a variety of topics (e.g., Homework: Looking Beyond the Work, Parent Awareness: The Key to Academic Success) developed specifically for parents. In addition, LACOE Parent Education Specialists can provide customized technical assistance in areas such as how to design a parent involvement strategic plan and timeline.

Further Information:

For more information contact any of the following LACOE Parent Education Specialists: Guadalupe Orozco at 562.922.8735, Octavio Castelo at 562.922.6836, or Nelson Lopez at 562.922.8763.

V-PLEX E-Parent Program

V-PLEX E-Parent Program is an online application that revolutionizes the way that school staff communicate with parents. V-PLEX realizes the potential of technology to get parents more involved with student achievement. It teaches parents about technology and also helps bring technology into family homes. V-PLEX and its partners provide discounted fully loaded computers, free internet access, email, and more to families. V-PLEX also holds workshops where parents catch up on computer and email technology as well as learn about more advanced applications in the Microsoft Office suite.

Further Information:

For more information about the V-PLEX E-Parent Program visit www.vplex.com or email info@vplex.com.

Acknowledgements

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The four parent center representatives who facilitated roundtable discussions at the November 2007 “Engaging Parents as Partners in Creating College Going Cultures: Developing Parent Centers with a Strong Academic, College Focus” conference provided the informational content for the *Four Working Models of Parent Centers in Los Angeles County* section. A special thank you to Monica Rios from Elizabeth Learning Center, Lisa Thompson and Kelly Bedford from Fremont High School, Principal Joy Bramlette from Hawthorne High School, and Mary Johnson from South Gate High School.

