

Southwest Educational Development Laboratory News

SED LETTER

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Family *and* Community Connections *with* Schools

Family *and* Community Connections *with* Schools Reflect Differing Cultures and Needs

By Leslie Blair, Editor

Sally Wade, director of the Florida Partnership for Family Involvement in Education, often begins family involvement workshops with this scenario: “You get a phone call from your child’s school. Is it good news or bad news?” Invariably all of the parents laugh and say, “bad news, of course.” For some families, bad news is the cornerstone of their school involvement experience. To overcome the negative expectations held by many families, schools have the responsibility to provide opportunities for family and community involvement and to make the school atmosphere inviting for all.

Involving families and communities is not an easy task for a variety of reasons. As this issue of *SEDLetter* shows, there are many strategies for involvement. Choosing the strategies that will be effective given a school’s culture and context can be difficult. Teachers and administrators may lack the training and time to plan family involvement programs and activities and to work with families. It also takes patience and time to build the relationships needed for a successful involvement program, especially in programs where parents share decision-making about curriculum and policies. But the payoffs can be great — improved student outcomes, the support of parents and community members, and improved staff morale. We touch upon some of these issues and introduce readers to SEDL’s National Center for Family and Community Connections with Schools. During the next few years, the Center will review and share research on issues related to forging connections between homes, schools, and communities to support student achievement.

Our first article, “One Child at a Time,” describes school-based mentoring programs in Oklahoma City and Austin, Texas. Though the program philosophies are different, both districts see student success as the desired outcome. In this issue, we also discuss the challenges of training parents and teachers for family and community involvement. New Mexico’s Parents Reaching Out (PRO) is an organization that increases parent advocacy through a variety of projects. PRO’s work provides examples of what can be done to prepare parents to make decisions about their children’s education and to help strengthen at-risk families. We learn about the need for preservice training to help educators work more effectively with families

in “The Missing Link,” based on a satellite broadcast produced by the National Center for Family and Community Connections with Schools. Finally, in “A Tale of Two Charters” we visit two Texas charter schools begun by women who saw the need to provide an alternative for students who were falling through the cracks in the education system. The schools serve different communities and student populations, but both are flourishing in part due to parent and community support.

Happy New Year from all of
us at the Southwest Educational
Development Laboratory!

SEDL

Cover Photo:
Director of 3M’s
mentoring program
Myra Schomburg
cheers on Wooten
Elementary
School student
Carrie Aleman.



SEDLLETTER

The Award-Winning
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One at a Child Time

The Case for School-Based Mentoring

By Leslie Belt



The idea that young people benefit from caring and consistent relationships with adults is by no means new. Ever since Odysseus entrusted the education of his son to Mentor in Homer's *Odyssey*, adults who provide children with prudent guidance have shared the loyal sage's name. Community-based child mentoring got its start in 1904, when Ernest K. Coulter founded a movement offering children in need of socialization the opportunity to connect with "big brothers" who served as positive adult role models. Big Brothers/Big Sisters (BB/BS), has grown to be the largest mentoring organization of its kind. Recently, BB/BS was the subject of well-documented research highlighting the positive effects of mentoring. These studies have clearly shown that mentored students have improved school attendance, grades, and family relationships, as well as a decreased risk of alcohol and drug use (see sidebar).

In response to such success, the demand for mentoring has steadily grown. According to the National Mentoring Partnership, nearly 16 million young people in the United States want or need mentors. While the exact number of formal, organized mentoring relationships is not known, it is estimated that fewer than one million youth are being served today. Among the innovative program approaches currently being explored to bridge this gap, school-based mentoring appears to offer the greatest promise. Big Brothers/Big Sisters of America has projected that by the year 2003, nearly one-third of their mentor-mentee matches will be school based.

D.J. Roberts enjoys personal attention from his mentor, 3M employee George Hare.

Effects of Mentoring ONE STUDY'S FINDINGS

According to a study of outcomes for youth at five school-based mentoring programs conducted by Big Brothers/Big Sisters of America, teachers reported that

- 64 percent of the students developed more positive attitudes toward school.
- 58 percent achieved higher grades in social studies, languages, and mathematics.
- 64 percent developed higher levels of self-confidence.

In addition, the study found that mentored youth are

- 46 percent less likely to use drugs.
- 27 percent less likely to begin using alcohol.
- 53 percent less likely to skip school.

As the chart below suggests, school-based mentoring differs from more traditional community-based efforts in ways that appear to have a positive effect on program scope and costs. One of the greatest advantages of school-based mentoring programs is the opportunity to reach many more children. Because children are usually referred by teachers instead of parents, the school-based programs can reach children whose parents don't have the time, energy, or inclination to involve their son or daughter in a community program.

Key Differences between School-Based and Community-Based Mentoring Programs		
Program characteristics	School-based	Community-based
Mentee referral	Initiated by teachers	Initiated by parents
Average monthly time commitment	6.25 hours	11.81 hours
Volunteer mentors are	Older, more diverse	Younger, Caucasian
Mentees are	Troubled students	At risk of becoming delinquent
Average annual costs per match (including in-kind donations)	Less than \$600	More than \$1,300

Source: Compiled from information contained in *Contemporary Issues in Mentoring*, edited by Jean Baldwin Grossman, a June 1999 publication of Public/Private Ventures.

Similar Outcomes, Different Approaches

All school-based mentoring programs — and the administrators, teachers, and community volunteers who serve them — share a common goal: student success. As Jack Lumbley, a program associate in SEDL's Evaluation Services points out, how that success is defined and measured can vary widely: "With the ongoing and increasing emphasis on accountability, people in schools have felt a strong need to be able to justify how they are spending their time with students. Every school has got to be concerned with academic performance. Just how broadly or narrowly a particular school sees the mentor's role affects the possible kinds of interventions that can be offered. Are children best served by adults who tutor them, or by adults who offer them friendship and guidance? Can one adult be expected to fill both of these roles?"

Ultimately, it is a question of view. And the answer is far from clear-cut. A look at two school-based mentoring programs in SEDL's southwestern region illustrates just how broadly contemporary mentoring practices can differ from district to district.

Oklahoma City Public Schools: Academic Success Is the Foundation of Self-Esteem

According to Billie Brown, director of Mentoring, Tutoring and Volunteer Programs for Oklahoma City Public Schools, 70 of the 94 schools composing this large metropolitan district are currently engaged in some sort of mentoring or tutoring program. Academic success is highly prized in Oklahoma City, and it is the clear objective of all mentoring efforts. While friendship and trust are seen as valued side effects of the mentor-student relationship, success is measured in terms of academic growth, which averages about one year across the district. For the 13 Title I schools who have invested in the Help One Student to Succeed (HOSTS) program, however, the average growth has been significantly higher. HOSTS is a nationally recognized mentoring program in which volunteer tutors guide students through complex learning experiences.

Brown thinks that much of students' self-esteem is based on how they do at school: "I don't know how you can begin making an impact until you start dealing with academic success. That's why all of our mentoring programs have a learning component to them. And frankly, with an average student growth rate of one year and seven months, the HOSTS program is by far the greatest success."

In large measure, this highly structured program works because the needs of its participants are clearly defined, Brown explains. "We look for children who are what we call 'at promise' — kids who would normally fall a little bit behind each year. The HOSTS program is successful because we test these students to identify the academic skills they need to work on. Based on this information, we put a tutoring plan in place. Mentors sit down with students one-on-one for approximately 45 minutes a week to work on specific skills."

Each of the more than 2,500 mentors now serving in the Oklahoma Public Schools has received at least two hours of training. Brown says this training helps to raise comfort levels: "We give the volunteers a variety of tutoring tips and success strategies, as well as a basic orientation to district procedures and guidelines." She adds. "We like our mentors to know exactly what they can expect from us, and what's expected of them."

Austin Independent School District (AISD): Self-Esteem Is the Foundation of Academic Success

Austin Independent School District (AISD) serves 78,000 students. Of these, 25 percent have special needs or are at-risk. For more than 18 years, Austin Partners in Education (a joint venture of the Greater Austin Chamber of Commerce, AISD, and members of the business community) has worked diligently to provide AISD with resources to better education for more children. Of these donations of cash, time, and in-kind contributions, mentoring remains the most highly prized and sought-after gift. Pat Dabbert, AISD director of educational partnerships, explains why.

“One of the reasons AISD is a strong believer in people serving as mentors to our students is that it makes a big difference in their behavior as well as in their academic success,” she says.

According to Dabbert, AISD views mentoring and tutoring as very separate skill sets. “Mentors serve a different role from tutors for our students. They are more like friends. Mentors are people students can share things with, someone who is totally focused on them. Some students don’t have that opportunity with any other adult in their lives. Ultimately, we’ve found that mentoring bolsters self-confidence and self-esteem, which helps students do better academically. Not all students need tutors, but I think most students would appreciate a mentor.”

Not surprisingly, in AISD these days demand for mentors far exceeds supply. With just over 2,000 mentors officially serving in the districts’ 103 schools, Dabbert admits that recruiting is one of her biggest challenges. “One thing we’re doing as we go out and talk to companies is encouraging them to be creative and flexible.” She notes, for example, IBM currently has 120 e-mail mentors — workers who can’t physically leave their jobs but work with Barbara Jordan Elementary School students



online. “As a district, we’re trying to remove barriers and focus on what’s good for students. School by school, class by class, we’re open to new ideas,” Dabbert says.

Measuring Up

A highly structured, tutoring-based program like HOSTS provides mentors, students, and administrators with academic objectives and goals against which student achievement can be assessed in a relatively straightforward manner. However, mentoring programs that don’t focus strictly on academics may require assessment of multiple outcomes such as student changes in attitude, classroom behavior, or attendance.

It’s a tall order, considering that it is time consuming and takes a lot more planning to measure life-skill changes. And while it may be possible to obtain this data by surveying teachers, parents, and students or by observing the mentored students while they are in their classrooms, the fact remains that we may not be able to directly link mentoring or a student’s social progress with higher academic achievement.

Success is just part of the fun for Wooten Elementary student Diana Aguilar during her weekly visit with mentor Laura Alvarado, a 3M employee.

What You Can Do to Support the Mentoring Relationship

Teachers can support the mentor-student relationship by

- Respecting the mentor's time with the student.
- Being willing to give the mentor advice when asked.
- Allowing the student to invite the mentor to participate in appropriate classroom activities.
- Letting the mentor know if the student is sick or unavailable.

Administrators can support the mentor-student relationship by

- Clearly communicating what's expected.
- Providing mentors with training.
- Providing a meeting space and activities.
- Acknowledging the mentor's contribution.

Counselors and parent support specialists or parent liaisons can support the mentor-student relationship by

- Making the mentor aware of child development or psychological issues.
- Helping the mentor understand child safety reporting responsibilities.
- Clarifying confidentiality issues.
- Helping to resolve conflicts.

Caught between Two Camps

The pressures of the increased demand for accountability was the subject of a recent conversation with Sarah Nelson, principal of Josephine Houston Elementary School in Austin. Like all school-based mentoring programs in the Austin Independent School District, Houston Elementary encourages and supports friendship as the number one objective of the relationship between mentors and students. This was not my first time in Nelson's office. My mentee Jeanette (now a fifth grader) and I have met with her on many occasions in the two years that I have been mentoring at this large urban school.

"Mentoring programs that used to help children develop into successful adults with good coping social skills are now all about raising test scores," says Nelson. "We're in an age where if it can't be measured in numbers, it isn't worth anything. It's hard to gather qualitative data about the power of change. I think that's why people go to programs like HOSTS. It's very clearly defined and it's fairly easy to manage once you get it up and running."

But Nelson sees mentoring more as a way to provide positive role models for students rather than as a method to boost test scores. And though she is concerned about the social costs of measurement-based education, she by no means opposes accountability. "In terms of measuring our success, I'm a supporter of accountability. I'm even okay with testing as long as it's one piece of the pie. But right now it's the whole pie." She continues, "If I wanted to do a case study to document the changes in Jeanette, I could find lots and lots of people to support the idea that Jeanette has changed. Jeanette could talk about that. That's time consuming. But if I had numbers we could say, 'Yeah, Jeanette's tests scores went up.' Which they did, by the way, they did go up. But what can I attribute that good news to? Mentoring? Teaching? What? I don't know. This is something I struggle with all the time in terms of where to put resources, because resources are limited."

It Takes a Team to Make Mentoring Work

Regardless of which approach a district takes, there's a lot to be said in favor of mentoring. It is simple, sensible, and cost-effective. Whether mentors and mentees are working on reading skills or life skills, they have a better chance of succeeding if their relationship is based on mutual respect, shared interests, and clear expectations. While thoughtful matching of mentor to mentee will help this relationship get off to a good start, it takes considerable support to keep it growing strong. When principals, counselors, and teachers join the mentoring team as advisers, cheerleaders, and friends, they send a clear message to the mentor, mentee, and community: When a child succeeds, we all succeed.

"When a child succeeds, we all succeed."



It takes a team to make mentoring work. Jeanette's mentoring team includes, clockwise from top, mentor Leslie Belt, parent specialist Bertha Cherry, principal Sarah Nelson, mentee Jeannette Belmares, and teacher Blanca Saunders.

3M Austin Center in the Business of Making a Difference

Since 1985, this 3M global sector headquarters facility has been an active supporter of Austin Partners in Education. Currently a team of 28 employees volunteer as mentor friends to children at nearby Wooten Elementary School. It's business as usual according to Myra Schomburg, who directs 3M's Mentoring Program as part of the company's Community Affairs organization within the Corporate Marketing and Public Affairs Department.

"Two of 3M's core values are respect for social and physical environment and to be a company that employees are proud to be a part of. We believe that our mentoring program addresses these corporate values. We believe that it is part of our social responsibility as a company to give back to the communities in which we have facilities. And we also think it is a good vehicle through which our employees can be proud of who 3M is in this community."

It's a business strategy that's working according to Bernardo Martinez, Wooten's parent support specialist and 3M's main contact while on campus. "Both parties benefit. Our 3M partners feel great about sharing their time, having a little friend. They are excited. Sometimes, I have to say, 'OK, guys, time's up. You're going to be late for your jobs.'"

In addition to his duties at Wooten, Martinez is actively involved in recruiting mentors for Austin Partners in Education. He offers educators the following advice on how to get the business community involved with your school.

"The biggest tip is to somehow make time to go out into the business world and share what you need at your campus. Let them know that the school needs their support. I'll be driving down a street and see a new business. I walk in there and ask for the manager. I keep it brief. Introduce myself and leave my card. In a few days I call back to see when we can sit down talk about how we can work together. I figure I'm either going to get a yes or a no."

3M's corporate-sponsored mentoring program is a reflection of the organization's core value commitment to give back to the community. These volunteer mentors spend one hour per week at nearby Wooten Elementary School.



Wooten Elementary School student Miguel Arroyo has developed a special bond with his mentor, 3M's Brian Kuhns.



SEDL's New Center Makes Family-Community Connections to Improve Learning



Staff members of SEDL's National Center for Family and Community Connections with Schools are (left to right) Lacy Wood, Amy Averett, Catherine Jordan, Artie Stockton, Dana Center partner Maggie Myers, Deborah Donnelly, and Vangie Orozco. Not pictured: Dana Center partner Marilyn Fowler.

Thirty-five years of research show that school, family, and community interaction can make a difference in a student's learning experience.

"Studies suggest that family involvement can improve student attendance, behavior, and academic achievement, while community involvement can help provide services that schools alone cannot give students and their families," says Catherine Jordan, director of SEDL's National Center for Family and Community Connections with Schools.

Based on this research, schools nationwide are tapping into their communities for support. But many schools and districts are unsure which programs or strategies for family and community involvement would most effectively improve student outcomes, given their student population and school and community context.

Jordan says, "When schools, families, and communities work together to address student achievement, their efforts may have a more significant impact on low-performing schools. To do this, schools, policymakers, and community groups must be knowledgeable about strategies and tools for family and community involvement, and be able to assess which of these would be most successful locally."

Established in 2000 under SEDL's Regional Educational Laboratory contract through the U.S. Department of Education, the national center is developing strategies to support people and organizations working to connect schools with families and communities across the country.

The center emphasizes partnerships that have a direct impact on student achievement in reading and mathematics, as well as contribute to overall student success. It also focuses on connecting families from diverse communities with schools and involving families in preparing children to enter kindergarten.

Center staff members are building a network of local, state, regional, and national organizations—including policymakers, educators, parents, and community members—to share information and raise public awareness about the school-family-community connection. National partners joining the center's network to disseminate the latest research, programs, policies, and practices from the country's 10 regional educational laboratories (RELs) include the Johns Hopkins Center on School, Family, and Community Partnerships; the National Center for Early Development and Learning at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill; the Public Education Network; and the Charles A. Dana Center at the University of Texas at Austin.

"Outside the REL network, there is no organization that is collecting and synthesizing the research and resources related to family and community connections with schools in a comprehensive way," says SEDL program specialist Amy Averett. "Our job is to pull together these types of information, synthesize them, and disseminate the synthesis so that practitioners can access and use research-based

Continued on page 11.

The Missing Link in Teacher Education Programs

By Leslie Blair

"I have to worry about my relationship with the kids, with the teacher next door, and with the principal. Now you are telling me I have to develop a relationship with parents!"

SEDL's National Center for Family and Community Connections with Schools recently produced a satellite broadcast of a lively panel discussion, "Educator Preparation for Connecting Families and Communities with Schools." Panelists included M. Elena Lopez, of the Harvard Family Research Project; Vivian Morris, a professor at the University of Memphis; Satomi Taylor, an associate professor at the University of Memphis, and Sally Wade, director of the Florida Partnership for Family Involvement in Education. The discussion was moderated by Bobby Ann Starnes, assistant professor at Montana State University. Much of the article that follows was taken from the broadcast.

Many new teachers don't think about it before stepping into the classroom, but they may spend more time building relationships than actually teaching — and many of these relationships will involve the parents of their students.

Sally Wade, director of the Florida Partnership on Family Involvement in Education at the University of South Florida, emphasizes that schools and teachers are constantly developing relationships and communicating with parents and families, even if they are not aware of it. Wade says she often hears the lament, "Now we have to do family involvement." She tells them "You're involved with families whether you want to be or not. It is better to send an intentional message than an unintentional message." In addition, Wade acknowledges there is a very practical need for teachers to have good relationships with parents. "Parents have more influence on their children's lives than we do, and we need their help."

Need for Preservice Training Is Clear

More than three decades of research have shown that family involvement plays an important role in student achievement. The research has spurred family and community involvement programs across the country, but still we are not providing sufficient training for teachers to work with families effectively.

M. Elena Lopez of the Harvard Family Research Project notes, "Since the middle 1960s, family and community involvement in education has made impressive gains in policy and program development." She explains, for example, that 11 federal acts authorize family involvement in a variety of programs, including

Title I programs, and that 24 states now have active legislation requiring parent and family involvement.

"The missing piece for me in this effort to incorporate family and community involvement in education is teacher education. Teacher education programs need to catch up with what's happening on the ground," Lopez says.

Vivian Morris, a professor in the College of Education at the University of Memphis and a strong advocate of family involvement in education, agrees. "We really need to prepare teachers to become involved with families — it's not something that comes naturally to us. Just as we need to teach reading or social studies, we need to teach our students in education the skills they need for family involvement."

Morris says preservice teachers often express concerns about dealing with parents once they are classroom teachers: "There is a great deal of anxiety in talking to parents, about having to do parent conferences." Often, Morris says, the preservice teachers see parents as adversaries, not partners. She believes that it's up to teacher educators to address that myth.

Wade agrees wholeheartedly. "Where is it that educators get ideas like 'all children can learn' — the ideas that stick with you throughout your professional career? I was talking about this with a group of educators one day and we all agreed that we learned those ideas as undergraduates. The power that a preservice program has to revolutionize and change American education is phenomenal."

In 1988, Southwest Educational Development Laboratory researchers Nancy Chavkin and David Williams prepared a study that is now considered a benchmark in the field of family and community involvement in education. After surveying teacher educators and classroom



“The power that a preservice program has to revolutionize and change American education is phenomenal.”

teachers in SEDL’s six-state region of Arkansas, Louisiana, New Mexico, Oklahoma, and Texas, Chavkin and Williams reported that educator training might indeed hinder parent involvement. Only 4 percent of the teacher educators they surveyed taught a complete course in parent involvement to preservice teachers, but 83 percent acknowledged that such a course should be taught. And 87 percent of the classroom teachers surveyed indicated they needed additional undergraduate training in parent involvement.

Some progress has been made since then. Twenty-two states now include family involvement in certification requirements, and there are innovative college courses and programs devoted to family involvement such as the Parent Education Model at the University of Houston at Clear Lake, the Peabody Family Involvement Initiative at Vanderbilt University, and the Teachers for Diversity Program at the University of Wisconsin. However, most family involvement training throughout the country is included as part of other coursework — mostly early childhood or special education courses.

Unfortunately the number of courses devoted to family involvement training is not likely to increase, Morris explains. “In our program and in many other programs across the country, there is a push to reduce the number of hours needed to graduate and a push to decrease the number of education courses but increase subject matter courses. We’re going to have to be very vigilant in seeing that we continue to push for having content in family and community involvement for our students.” At the University of Memphis where Morris teaches, such pressure caused the College of Education to combine its family and community involvement class with a course in classroom management.

Integrating Family Involvement Training into All Teacher Education Curriculum Is Key

Given the realities colleges of education face, Morris, Wade, and Lopez agree that infusing the preservice curriculum with family and community involvement training will be the only way to provide adequate training across levels — so that preservice elementary, middle school, and high school teachers receive the training, not just early childhood or special education majors.

Infusing the curriculum goes beyond adding family-centered activities to the preservice teacher’s repertoire, such as incorporating methods for involving families in their children’s home reading activities or providing family math activities in mathematics courses for elementary education majors. Infusing the curriculum means helping future educators question their perceptions about families and family structures and about what family involvement in schools looks like. They should also learn how to build relationships between families and schools. Says Chavkin, who is now a professor at Southwest Texas State University, “The developmental nature of family involvement is often ignored—it takes time to develop relationships, gain trust, and build a vision.” Chavkin notes that communication has also been ignored in preservice training. “When teachers think about communication, they think about what they are sending home or saying to parents—they often don’t consider how or if they are listening to parents.”

Wade stresses the need for “modeling the partnership we’re asking educators to build with parents and families.” To model such partnerships, the Florida Partnership on Family Involvement in Education began its successful, “Family as Faculty” program.

Through “Family as Faculty,” families are recruited as guest lecturers to make presentations to preservice teachers and to discuss with them ways the families have been involved and ideally would like to be involved in their children’s schools and education. The program offers future teachers an opportunity to hear from and interact with families from all walks of life. It also shows them the barriers and keys to successful involvement of families and provides opportunities for role-playing with real parents and receiving feedback from parents about the college students’ communication skills.

Morris mentions other ways to integrate family involvement into courses. The University of Memphis has used parent-teacher-principal panels as a way to provide preservice teachers with

reality-based experiences. The panel give students the opportunity to ask parents, teachers, and principals what kinds of skills they will need to work effectively with families. The faculty members have also held diversity panels and often give assignments to help get students comfortable talking to parents. The university has successfully used professional development schools as learning laboratories where future teachers have the opportunity to develop a parent education plan — first surveying the parents at a professional development school and then working in teams to develop workshops for parents.

These real-life training and problem-solving experiences are invaluable for preservice teachers who often aren't prepared for the differences in their students' cultural backgrounds, economic conditions, and home environments — all of which can affect a student's adjustment to school and academic achievement. Says Morris, "Because many families' experiences with school haven't been good, it's the teacher's responsibility to reach out." But first they must learn how.

SEDL

FINE

FINE Helps Educate the Teacher Educators

In an effort to encourage professors and instructors in Colleges of Education to incorporate family involvement training in their classes, the Harvard Family Research Project established the Family Involvement Network of Education (FINE). The goals of FINE are to

- strengthen the visibility of promising family involvement courses and curricula,
- exercise leadership in knowledge development and strategies to meet professional and state standards in family and community relations,
- develop assessment methods for continuous innovation and improvement in family involvement training, and
- create opportunities for families and schools to participate in instructional design and implementation of training programs,

For more information about FINE

or to join the network, visit its Web page at <http://www.gse.harvard.edu/~hfrp/projects/fine.html>.

The Web page has resources useful for teacher educators, including teaching cases, research briefs, and bibliographies which may be downloaded.

Leslie Blair is a SEDL communications associate and editor of SEDLetter. You may reach Leslie at lblair@sedl.org.

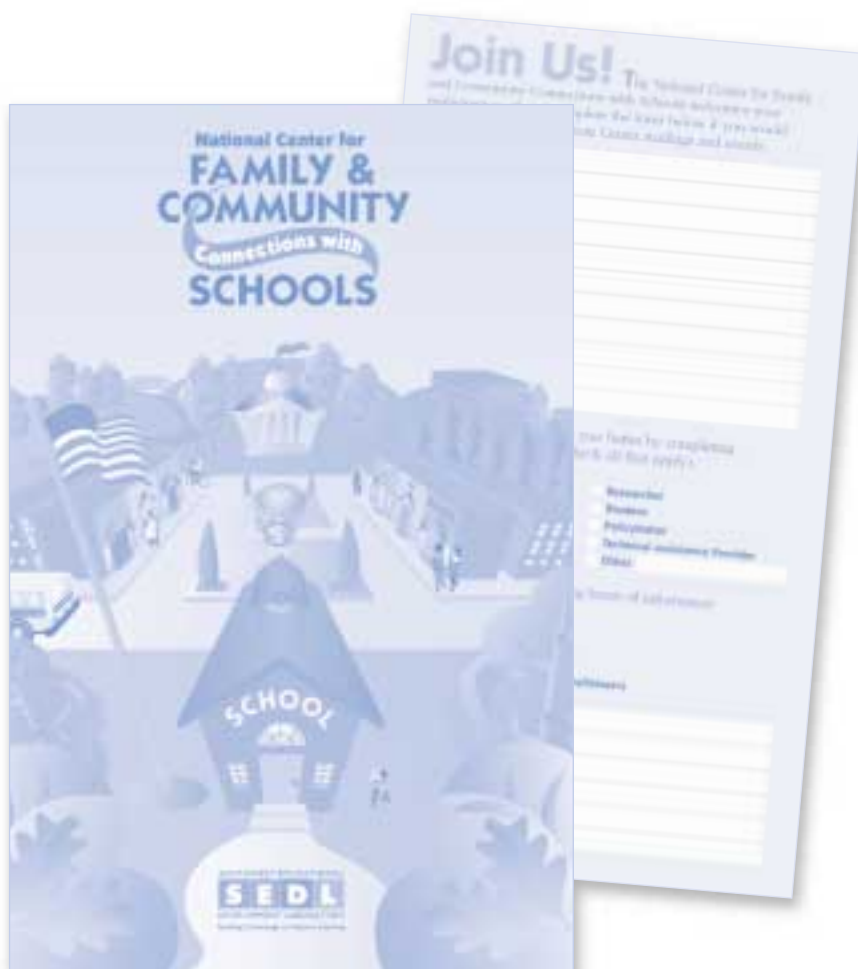
SEDL's New Center Makes Family-Community Connections to Improve Learning,

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information to support their practice."

This year's research synthesis, the first in a series of five, covers four key issues: clarification of the concept of family and community connections with schools, measuring the outcomes of family and community connections, advancing the research base for family and community connections with schools, and addressing critical areas for research in family and community connections with schools. The synthesis and an annotated bibliography of current research may soon be found online at www.sedl.org/connections.

In addition to the annual synthesis, the staff of the national center is presenting video-conference or satellite broadcasts every quarter and an annual conference. The most recent satellite broadcast was "Educator Preparation for Connecting Families and Communities with Schools," while the Center's annual conference held on November 16 focused on "Family and Community Connections with Schools — Emerging Issues." Video clips from the broadcast and conference will also be available online this spring. **SEDL**



Parents Reach Beyond Their Own Families

By Pamela Porter

"Our home literally became our asylum — we felt very alone, very isolated," says Chris Chapman, who now works to help other parents avoid some of the heartache she has experienced as the mother of an autistic child. When her "perfect baby" began exhibiting self-abusive and inconsolable behavior, she and her husband had no one to turn to. Even family members were overwhelmed by the little boy's out-of-control conduct.

Relief finally came from concerned special education teachers in Las Cruces, NM, where her 10-year-old son began attending a class for autistic students. Today she offers similar support in her position of family liaison/ trainer for Parents Reaching Out (PRO), a New Mexico organization founded and operated by families. Because of her own experience, Chapman can identify "with those parents who have been struggling for years and years."

Working from their kitchens in Albuquerque, the PRO founders joined forces 20 years ago to get the best education available for their children with disabilities. That meant educating themselves — and in many cases, the school districts as well — about what services these kids, from age 3–21 years, were entitled to receive by law. The parents then became informed advocates and made positive decisions to help these students achieve their potential. Sharing their experiences with others in need became their vocation.

Executive director Sallie Van Curen has been with PRO since its inception. She is gratified that last year alone PRO touched approximately 58,000 families in a variety of ways throughout the state. Parents of newborns to young adults have found an understanding ear — as well as a source of ongoing support and information, whatever the question.



PRO family liaison/trainers Mary Jo Roch, Julia Calbert, and Chris Chapman review the updated family training manual, developed by the organization and distributed to any parent who requests one.

PRO Helps Families Make Changes for Children

PRO's five major goals are to (1) decrease family stress and isolation, (2) increase all families' knowledge and use of available resources, (3) increase the confidence and skills of families by providing emotional support and opportunities to acquire special information and training, (4) enhance the education, understanding, and sensitivity of persons who work with children and families, and (5) work for positive changes in the systems that affect our children.

It achieves these goals through several projects (see "PRO Projects Focus on a Variety of Needs") all available in Spanish or one of the Native American dialects in the state.

"Parents really do care about their children. Answering the phone, listening to the tears, hearing the frustration — you realize they care very much about their kids," says Van Curen, whose organization gives families the courage to intervene on their children's behalf.

Program director Larry Fuller nods enthusiastically and adds, "The number-one indicator of how students do in school is parent

**PRO executive director
Sallie Van Curen**



involvement.” Like all of the full-time PRO staff, he puts in far more than 40 hours a week because of the organization’s emphasis on maintaining close, personal contacts. “The highlight for me is when we work with a family and that family makes an informed decision based on what’s best for them. That’s just primo stuff!”

Project Petroglyphs Makes a Difference in Southwestern New Mexico Schools

In the tiny village of Columbus, within sight of the U.S.-Mexican border, the PRO process begins anew. A young woman discusses her son’s situation with Eugene Sierra who works with PRO’s Project Petroglyphs in southwestern New Mexico. Project Petroglyphs has been funded by Goals 2000 and targets parents with children in public schools.

The mother is encouraged by Sierra’s offer to help in any way. Showing her an example letter for requesting a screening evaluation of her child, he cautions her to keep copies of all correspondence and make notes on all conversations with district officials.

“It’s good that you’re getting help now,” Sierra tells her. “Your child could be labeled a troublemaker, but he probably causes a disturbance because he realizes something is wrong, something is not clicking. Most kids would rather face a trip to the principal’s office than be embarrassed in front of their peers because of being unable to keep up,” he says.

Armed with PRO’s *Handbook of Parental Rights*—which explains federal and state regulations, courses of action to take, and other valuable information—the relieved-looking mother leaves, and Sierra discloses how he became involved with the organization.

He says he wasn’t aware his youngest son had a learning disability until the fourth grade, when he started bringing home D’s and F’s on his report card. The father diligently spent his evenings going over homework with the student, confident the grades would improve. They didn’t.

PRO Projects Focus on a Variety of Needs

Parents Reaching Out (PRO) helps families across New Mexico through the five projects described below.

Project Adobe focuses on working with parents of special education students. It provides parent training, technical assistance, and information to develop and maintain a network of trained volunteer parents. These PRO volunteers guide families through the educational maze, assisting them with their child’s evaluation, diagnostic assessments, and Individualized Education Plan (IEP) process.

With **Dreamcatcher**, a parent-to-parent project, PRO strives to connect families with a volunteer whose situation is similar and who offers emotional support as well as information. This program helps parents receiving early intervention services, advising mothers and fathers how to build new dreams and work with professionals to see them come true, for their young child with a developmental delay or those at risk for such a delay. “Our goal is to get families off to a good, smooth start,” says program director Larry Fuller.

Questions about health care issues and children with special needs are answered by the PRO program, **Family Voices of New Mexico**, which assists families in understanding their rights regarding issues like insurance, managed care, and Supplemental Security Income (SSI). The **Families as Faculty** project is a collaborative effort between the School of Medicine and College of Education at the University of New Mexico and Western New Mexico University that enables future doctors and educators to learn firsthand about persons with disabilities by matching them with these families.

Project Petroglyphs, named for the ancient pictures etched in New Mexico’s rocks, seeks to aid all parents dealing with the state public schools, no matter what their situation. Funded by a Goals 2000 Parental Assistance Program Grant from the U.S. Department of Education, the project offers one-on-one support, telephone assistance, and hundreds of workshops and educational opportunities. The grant also established PRO as New Mexico’s Parent Information and Resource Center.

Liaisons trained by the **Parents as Teachers** project, such as Mirela Rivera, are available to answer questions and check in on parents of children from birth to three years old. “All the parents I work with are different,” she explains. “Everyone wants to know if their children are developing normally. I can point out milestones to watch for.” Her emphasis is on early literacy, and she stresses the importance of reading—and making frequent eye contact with the child—at any age.

Parents Reaching Out staff meet to discuss PRO activities: (from left) Larry Fuller, program manager for Project Adobe; Sallie Van Curen, executive director, Ann Stinger, program manager for elementary/secondary education; and Alicia Amastasio, comptroller.



Sierra shakes his head and continues, “In my culture, you insult your kid — you say you’re dumb, what’s wrong with you, etc.” But when he decided to sit in on his child’s class, “within the first two hours, I realized something was wrong,” he says. He confronted the school and was offered no help, but his wife Roccio, who works with Head Start in Columbus, told him the district was required to evaluate the boy. He calls his own behavior before he knew of his son’s learning disabilities “heartbreaking.” But now with the services his son has subsequently received, the father says his son is learning to compensate for the processing problem that was causing him to perform poorly in school.

“Immediately PRO gave me the information I needed,” he notes. That initial contact has transformed Sierra into an advocate — serving 45–50 families in the Deming, Silver City, and Columbus areas — who is able to tackle all issues in his work with Project Petroglyphs.

Mobilizing parents to improve conditions in the community by working together has been one of Sierra’s achievements. A tragic event in

Deming,* where a 12-year-old boy shot and killed a younger girl, prompted this action.

When the district’s superintendent scheduled a meeting to invite parent input about the incident, only a handful showed up. Sierra used his networking skills to encourage each of the participants to bring others, and the number soon swelled to about a hundred interested residents. They brainstormed and were able to identify, then prioritize common concerns by following The Right Question Project training he received from PRO.

Parents felt empowered when they learned the technique, which encourages the formation of open-ended questions to set realistic objectives. In response to parent requests, the school’s visitor policy is more strictly enforced, and the mayor and police chief have also agreed to provide increased security.

The fact that the isolated community offered youngsters no recreational opportunities emerged as another top issue — especially with the temptations of illegal activities waiting just across the border in Palomas, Mexico. Parents pitched in to clear weeds and rocks from school property, and the district installed new playground equipment and basketball goals. An activities bus was also added to the Columbus route so high school students could stay after class for meetings and sports.

“Our problem in this area is that our people don’t question authority. We don’t want to push it any further or make waves,” Sierra observes. But, like all those involved in Parents Reaching Out, he believes, “The parents are the experts — they know what’s best for their children.”

Family liaison/trainer Kimberly Bryand gets help translating materials from English into Spanish from Julia Calbert.



*Columbus is in the Deming Public Schools district.



Family liaison/trainer Eugene Sierra meets with PRO volunteer Ricardo Gutierrez R., who helps parents in Columbus, New Mexico, and Palomas, Mexico, understand educational opportunities for all children. Through a special arrangement with the school district, children from Palomas attend school across the border in Columbus.

RQP Empowers Parents

For the past decade, the **Right Question Project (RQP)** has been teaching people to advocate for themselves and their children using a simple tool — question formulation. The technique challenges people to think in questions rather than in statements, helps them prioritize their concerns, and gives them practice in a step-by-step process for formulating questions.

RQP has its roots in a 1991 parent involvement project that was based in Lawrence, Massachusetts. “Very often we heard from parents that they weren’t participating in the educational process because they didn’t know what to ask,” says Luz Santana, co-director of the project. She says she and co-director Dan Rothstein began helping parents form their own questions, which led to the Question Formulation Technique. Rather than providing parents with a list of questions they should ask, RQP encourages parents to develop critical thinking skills and rely on the expertise they have developed instead of depending on others. “We don’t lecture,” she says, “but lead parents through the process.” She notes that New Mexico’s Parents Reaching Out (PRO) group, like many other service organizations, has been able to integrate RQP training into its regular work. In the case of PRO, the training has even been incorporated into home visits.

The technique is successful because it empowers people to effect change in institutions and systems. They begin by learning to be advocates for themselves and their children, then are able to move beyond advocating in one setting to navigate their way through other bureaucratic systems — often health care or social services systems.

Besides the Question Formulation Technique, RQP offers two training packages: “Curriculum and Report Cards,” designed to increase parent participation in their child’s education and “The Tool,” a more extensive program that teaches parents how to address various issues in their child’s education, such as placement, curriculum, standards and assessment, and decision-making processes. For more information on RQP products and training, visit the organization’s Web site at <http://www.rightquestion.org>.

Parents Reaching Out

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Web site: <http://www.parentsreachingout.org>.

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A Tale of Two Charters

By Carey P. Clayton

The educational reform movement of the early 1990s has led to the opening of 170 charter schools in Texas since 1996. Authorized by the State Board of Education, these schools offer alternatives for parents and students. In exchange for clear educational goals and accountability, charter schools are given flexibility for innovation. Through the years since this legislation was passed, many charter schools have struggled and failed, but there are success stories, too, including two central Texas charter schools—the Katherine Anne Porter School in Wimberley and the Audre and Bernard Rapoport Academy in Waco.

This tale of two Texas charter schools is, in many ways, a story of opposites. The first of these, Katherine Anne Porter School, is located in the rural community of Wimberley about 45 miles southwest of Austin. Drawing on students from three counties, it is a high school with a student population that is 90 percent white. The second charter school, the Audre and Bernard Rapoport Academy, is situated in a housing project in Waco, a bustling midsize city. Serving prekindergarten through third grade, the school's student population is 92 percent black.

Surprisingly, the schools have much in common. Both schools opened their doors to children who were falling between the cracks in public school. They were begun by dynamic, highly educated women willing to work for the benefits and opportunities they see as fundamental for children to learn, grow, and eventually give back to their communities.

Yana Bland, director of the Katherine Anne Porter School, saw a need for an educational alternative for some of the high school students in her community.



Katherine Anne Porter School (KAPS)



KAPS student Alex Mollberg says the only rule at the high school is “to treat everyone with courtesy and respect.”

Alex Mollberg was suspended from a public high school four times in the first two months of school last year for what the school deemed an unacceptable hairstyle. When his father heard about the Katherine Anne Porter School (KAPS) that opened in Wimberley in 1999, Mollberg's parents investigated. They were impressed enough to enroll their son and daughter, even though it is approximately 30 miles from their home. “This school is a godsend!” exclaims Alex's mother Kathleen. “We've raised our

children to appreciate diversity,” she says. “We want them to get a good education, but we want it to be in line with the way we've raised them.” A former secondary school teacher, Mrs. Mollberg is thrilled with the open and accepting environment at KAPS. Even more important, she feels, are the opportunities her children, Alex and Laura, have here to express themselves freely as individuals and participate in decisions concerning their high school education. Alex reports, “When I came home from KAPS the first day, I was amazed. They treat us like adults here. There's really only one rule here and that is to treat everyone with courtesy and respect.”

Director Yana Bland has plenty of experience with students others might label as “different” or “diverse.” Born on the small island of Malta and educated in England, Bland has 16 years of teaching experience in four different countries. She holds a degree in economics and a doctorate in philosophy from the Council of National Academic Awards in England. Before becoming director for the school, Bland was the director of the Katherine Anne Porter Museum, a free public museum in the childhood home of the Pulitzer Prize-winning Texas author.

Programs sponsored by the museum to reach out to young writers brought Bland in touch with a need in her community for educational

alternatives. "One size does not fit all!" she exclaims.

Before applying for a charter with the Texas Education Agency, Bland surveyed administrators in public schools throughout Hays County seeking support. Principals and central-office school administrators in Wimberley invited Bland to share her vision with community leaders. She convinced them that a charter school would benefit everyone in the community, not just students. There was an outpouring of support from local businesses, parents, and large corporations like Motorola, which donated computers and two school buses for the school's opening. With a facility rented on flexible terms and many donated materials and supplies, Katherine Anne Porter School opened its doors in 1998 to students from ninth through twelfth grade.

Approximately 10 percent of the one hundred KAPS students have been home-schooled, while others have attended public schools in Wimberley, Dripping Springs, San Marcos, Blanco, and Austin. Because 40 percent of students are considered at risk, Bland has worked to make school relevant to their goals in life. She does this by offering students the chance to explore career opportunities through internships with local businesses and professionals. She also brings in guest speakers that have included lawyers, health professionals, chefs, and financial advisors.

Students and parents have a voice in curriculum through the Student Achievement Committee. This group of parents, teachers, and students meets biweekly on Thursdays at lunchtime over pizza to discuss curriculum opportunities and ways to improve student performance. One of the committee's activities was to generate a survey of students' interests that has resulted in the creation of an automotive technology class, a weight-lifting class, and advanced placement English classes.

At KAPS, a core curriculum is offered, as well as electives in journalism, environmental studies, and creative writing. In keeping with their namesake's philosophy and vocation, KAPS cultivates and supports students as writers. Writing is a focal activity throughout the curriculum and the school sponsors an annual literary festival, welcoming participants from area schools and encouraging members of the community to submit writing in categories including poetry, fiction, and nonfiction. There is no entry fee, and prizes are awarded by age groups.

Featured in the school's scrapbook are student surveys, editorials, reports, and artwork, all available in the school's lobby for perusal by visitors. Past service projects are illustrated with photos showing students participating in



Volleyball at KAPS

community cleanup projects, visiting with the elderly in a local nursing home, and conducting interviews with local residents about perceived needs for service in the community. The school's community service projects tend to focus on environmental concerns, and this year's project will be incorporated into science classes.

The students are working with the Wimberley Watershed Association to offer free water quality analysis for area residents who bring in samples. Other environmental projects have included cleanups at the Blanco River and landscaping at the Emily Anne Theater, an outdoor amphitheater in Wimberley that sponsors a popular summer Shakespeare festival featuring local student talent.

The students also have a role in raising money for the school. The local Lions Club allows KAPS students to run a parking concession at its monthly Market Days flea market, netting the school about \$400 per month.

When asked about their relationship with local public schools, Bland says, "We're like a little sister to Wimberley ISD. They support us in so many ways." WISD shares its T-1 high-speed digital network line, invites KAPS teachers to share in-service training opportunities, and refers potential students.

Teachers at KAPS are drawn by the opportunity to serve students in need. Lori Martin, who teaches a popular weight-lifting class and prepares the school's state-required Public Education Information Management System (PEIMS) reports, says, "I started subbing here last year and just got attached to the kiddos!"

Science teacher and athletic director Ryan Hogue spent three years teaching in a public school boot-camp program before joining the KAPS faculty this year. Ryan explains that many of the KAPS teachers have made a financial sacrifice to be part of this charter school, but they feel as he does: "There's a definite need for this program. It's fun, and I know we make a big difference in these kids' lives."

"There's a definite need for this program. . . . we make a big difference in these kids' lives."

Rapoport Academy opened the doors of its brand new facility in 2000, two years after the charter school got its start in the basement of a nearby church.



Audre and Bernard Rapoport Academy

It's lunchtime at Rapoport Academy, and Angel Wright's prekindergarten students beam happily as they sit on the floor in the main hallway outside the cafeteria waiting their turn to eat. Nearby, Kristy Donaldson's second graders spot the camera and huddle proudly around their teacher, posing for a picture. At the other end of the building, Mrs. Cotton's prekindergarten kids gather on the rug around her rocking chair, winding down for a nap after their lunch. In the teacher's workroom, director Nancy Grayson joins some of her teachers for their lunch break. Music plays softly in the background, and a jar of Hershey's miniature candy bars sits invitingly in the center of the table. "We always have music and chocolate," explains Grayson. The atmosphere is happy and relaxed as teachers share a few minutes of time with each other. When asked to compare Rapoport to their public school experiences, they have much to say. Third-grade teacher Brandy Battistella spent one year at a public school before joining the Rapoport faculty. Battistella notes that at the school where she taught, there was an intense focus on the Texas Assessment of Academic Skills (TAAS) test. Although Rapoport does not concentrate on drilling students for the TAAS, their reading scores for third grade last year were 100 percent. She attributes much of their success to small class size — no more than 15 students per teacher.

In the library, reading specialist Angie Lowe sits at a table helping a student with phonics. Librarian Sandra Swanson explains from behind her desk that she's busy ordering more books — the library has received a \$50,000 grant. Swanson spent eight years as a public school librarian before joining Grayson's team. "What I enjoy is the freedom to think and make choices. In public schools," says Swanson, "you are somewhat stifled, with fewer options." Rapoport's library is open to students and their families in the summer, offering story time and family reading. Additionally, a reading camp is held in midsummer to boost reading skills and combat loss of verbal skills that students sometimes experience during the summer break.

Grayson's long list of accomplishments before opening Rapoport Academy in 1998 include receiving a master's degree in educational psychology from Baylor University and completing coursework for a doctorate in developmental psychology from Texas A&M. Her extensive connections in the Waco community, evolved from years of dedicated service, have enabled her to acquire the necessary funding to build the school's new facility, which opened in 2000. Her natural inclination to help others rose to a sense of urgency when she found that only 33 percent of third graders in the economically disadvantaged neighborhood of East Waco were passing the TAAS test.

Determined to make a difference in these children's academic success, Grayson has incorporated a mandatory parental involvement program that emphasizes parents' reading to their children for 15 to 30 minutes every night and keeping a reading log, providing a quiet place for their child to do homework, and volunteering at school or a school-related function once per semester. And most of the parents exceed expectations for volunteering — more than 300 hours of parent volunteer work were logged last year. Some of the grant money obtained last year has been used to fund a parenting class which meets twice a month and teaches parents about behavior management and academic tutoring. To encourage parent attendance, Grayson provides supper for the entire family and raffles a donated computer at every class.

Grayson says Rapoport's success is due to a variety of factors, including small class size, a phonics-based program, tremendous one-on-one support to students with teaching assistants and a reading specialist, and "a fabulous certified librarian who can acquire and use materials that excite children." Further credit goes to the Core Knowledge Curriculum, a rigorous content-based program fully integrated with the Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills (TEKS).

Though she works long hours and takes no salary herself, Grayson's aggressive pursuit of grants and donations allows her to offer her teachers competitive salaries. She reports that 95 percent of the program grants she writes are funded. Though she seems to possess endless energy and enthusiasm, Grayson admits that schools face many challenges: "The pressure is overwhelming. Charter schools have to generate the same reports as public schools, and basically the only requirement we don't have to meet is having certified teachers." She adds that all of Rapoport's teachers are certified, however.

There is also a sense of isolation that derives



Rapoport Academy director Nancy Grayson takes time out to read with one of her students.

from being unique and self-contained. Grayson comments that each charter is written specifically to address certain grade levels, curriculum and student populations. "The only common denominator is that we all look different! So when it comes to advice, sharing ideas, etc., it is difficult." Legislation granting a teacher pay raise last year specifically excluded charter schools. Grayson feels this only increases the sense of isolation with which many charter schools struggle.

Helping to combat such isolation is the wholehearted support that comes from the the community, including the Waco public schools. Waco ISD provides meal service for Rapoport's students. Because many children don't get regular meals at home, Grayson allows second and third helpings of food at breakfast and lunch. Rapoport's students are visited by eighth graders from nearby Carver Middle School who come to read to kindergarteners. The principal and staff of Doris Miller elementary school confer on a regular basis with Grayson and her staff. A local private school, St. Paul's Elementary, sends sixth graders to spend time reading with younger students, promoting experience with diversity and expanding the horizons of both younger and older students.

Parents, public schools, and community businesses have breathed life and vigor into these two successful, growing charter schools. Parents in the low-income subsidized housing



It's lunch time at Rapoport Academy.

neighborhood near Rapoport Academy are volunteering and learning how to play an active role in their children's success. With the guidance of Rapoport's parent involvement policy, they are exceeding expectations and student achievement is high. KAPS has offered choices for parents and students who have responded overwhelmingly. The high school is growing quickly in response to pleas from parents in search of smaller classes, input into the curriculum, and individualized instruction for their children.

From dramatically improving academic performance and parent involvement to rescuing dropouts and nurturing young authors, these two charter schools are at the top of their class. **SEDL**

Carey Clayton is a writer and high school English teacher who lives in Central Texas.



Lisa Parks waits with her first-graders for their turn in the cafeteria.



We received a great deal of feedback on the last issue of *SEDLetter* ("Teachers — They Matter Most"), ranging from requests for multiple copies and for permission to reprint articles, to comments from educators in the field.

Voices from the Field

Bob Wells, superintendent of Edna ISD South Texas wrote:

I really enjoyed the most recent *SEDLETTER*, though I did react to some articles, particularly Ms. Clayton's piece. . . . The worst public relations information about teaching comes from teachers. Students do not want to become teachers because teachers spend time complaining about teaching — the requirements, the salary, and the pressure — to their students. I spend a great deal of time publicly promoting the teaching profession and the teachers employed in my district. No matter what I say, students who graduate from high school have likely heard twelve years of complaining. . . . If teachers are unhappy in their current setting, given the number of statewide vacancies, they should leave. If people enter the profession with the goal of making more than just above the federal poverty level, then they should leave. If people enter the profession and seek to practice without accountability, then they should leave. Meanwhile, as long as teachers complain to students and the community, then the perception of teaching will remain right where it is.

We also heard from Vicki Creed of Ada, Oklahoma, who wrote:

How do I let Carey Clayton know how much I enjoyed her article "Tough Enough to Teach" in the October, 2001, issue of *SEDLetter*? Not only was her article well written, but she hit the nail right on the head in every area. Thanks so much for printing it.

Educator Authors Needed

We are looking for educators — administrators, teachers, or those working in higher education — to write for "Voices in the Field." The next issue of *SEDLetter*, scheduled to be printed late spring, will focus on student achievement. We will examine what it takes to improve student achievement and learning and what the No Child Left Behind Act means for schools and districts in our five-state region of Arkansas, Louisiana, New Mexico, Oklahoma, and Texas. If you would like to contribute an essay based on your experiences related to the improvement of student achievement, please contact editor Leslie Blair. You may reach Leslie by e-mail (lblair@sedl.org) or telephone (1-800-476-6861). Essays should be no longer than 1,000 words, and we offer an honorarium for essays printed in *SEDLetter*.

As always, we are happy to receive your comments about *SEDLetter* articles as well as suggestions for improving the magazine.

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