

How Parent Liaisons Can Help Bridge the Home–School Gap

MAVIS G. SANDERS
Johns Hopkins University

ABSTRACT. In this qualitative case study, the author describes (a) how parent liaisons in a diverse suburban district have supported school, family, and community partnerships and (b) the role played by the district family and community involvement specialist. On the basis of analyses of interview, observation, survey, and document data, the author identifies 4 roles played by liaisons that enhanced home–school partnerships. The liaisons provided (a) direct services to families at risk, (b) support for teacher outreach, (c) support for school-based partnership teams, and (d) data for partnership program improvement. On the basis of these findings, the author offers practical recommendations for districts seeking to establish or improve liaison programs to build stronger ties between schools and the families of all students.

Keywords: community partnerships, family involvement, parent liaisons

For decades, authors have documented the gap that exists between schools and homes. About 30 years ago, Lawrence-Lightfoot (1978) argued that this gap should be expected because of the different roles and goals of schools and families. However, she argued further that when this gap is more reflective of unequal status and power than of differing values and perspectives it becomes dysfunctional and potentially “denigrating and abusive” to the less powerful group (p. 41).

Unfortunately, this is the type of gap that often exists between schools and families of color and those in poverty. Weiss, Kreider, Lopez, and Chatman (2005) observed,

Teachers’ and school administrators’ perceptions of parents’ socioeconomic backgrounds influence how they interact with parents, and whether or not they support or reject parent strategies of involvement. All too often, school personnel treat poor parents from a deficit perspective, which becomes a barrier to family involvement. (p. xvii)

However, schools can create cultures that promote relationships among teachers, building administrators, and family members that minimize the effects of socioeconomic class and ethnic differences on families’ involvement in their children’s learning at home and school. In this article,

I describe (a) how parent liaisons in a diverse suburban district have supported schools in creating such cultures and (b) the role of the district family and community involvement specialist.

First, I describe school, family, and community partnerships and the role that liaisons can play in their development. Second, I discuss the methods used in the study. Third, I explain the district’s partnership program and the ongoing development of its liaison program. Fourth, I identify four roles played by liaisons that helped to support the families of students at risk. Last, I offer practical recommendations for districts seeking to establish or improve liaison programs to build stronger ties between schools and the families of all students.

School, Family, and Community Partnerships

Programs of school, family, and community partnerships promote collaboration among students, families, communities, and professional educators to achieve school excellence and student success. When families, schools, and communities work collaboratively, the following practice-specific outcomes have been documented:

- higher student achievement;
- improved student behavior and attendance; and
- more positive school climates (Henderson & Mapp, 2002)

Effective partnerships require that schools view parents and communities as partners in the educational process and create environments in which collaboration for students’ success is encouraged and supported. Epstein (Epstein et al., 2002) provided a framework of six types of involvement to help schools organize such action around important goals for students’ learning. The six types of involvement are the following:

Address correspondence to Mavis G. Sanders, Teacher Development and Leadership, Johns Hopkins University, 6740 Alexander Bell Drive, Columbia, MD 21046, USA. (E-mail: msanders@jhu.edu)
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1. *Parenting*—helping all families to understand child and adolescent development and establish home environments that support children as students.
2. *Communicating*—designing and conducting effective two-way communication about school programs and children's progress.
3. *Volunteering*—recruiting and organizing help and support for school programs and student activities.
4. *Learning at home*—providing information and ideas to families about ways to help students at home with homework and curricular-related decisions and activities.
5. *Decision making*—including parents in school decisions and developing parent leaders.
6. *Collaborating with the community*—identifying and integrating resources and services from the community to strengthen and support schools, students, and their families.

When schools integrate into their educational programs activities that include these six types of involvement, they also create opportunities for meaningful interaction among individuals in students' schools, families, and communities.

School, family, and community partnerships are more difficult when schools and families do not share (a) a set of beliefs about the roles of schools, families, and teachers in the education and socialization of children; (b) cultural or socioeconomic backgrounds; (c) educational or personal experiences; or (d) a language with which to discuss such issues. Student diversity, although arguably an asset in schools, is likely to increase the difficulty of home-school partnerships. Yet, in many schools in the United States and abroad, administrators and teachers increasingly have backgrounds that are different from those of their students and families. Therefore, educators need support to adjust their interactions with students' families and communities to foster academic success. Parent liaisons are one way in which schools and districts are trying to provide this support (Jacobson, 2003).

A search of two educational research databases, ERIC and Education Full Text, generated more than 40 articles, about 20 of which were published in refereed journals, highlighting the importance of parent liaisons for family engagement. Although the job descriptions and professional responsibilities of liaisons described in these publications differed by site, a common expectation was that liaisons would help to connect schools and families, especially families of children at risk for school failure. For example, several school-reform programs, such as *Achieving-Being-Caring* (McConaughy, Kay, Welkowitz, Hewitt, & Fitzgerald, 2008) and *Families and Schools Together* (Haxby, 2007), include parent liaisons to promote parent engagement in children's learning. Other school- and community-based programs have used parent liaisons as emissaries to increase family awareness of key issues such as HIV/AIDS (Public Education Network, 2002).

Program evaluations have reported positive results from liaison programs, including improved student achievement

and engagement (Vulliamy & Webb, 2003). In a study of dropout rates among Latino adolescents, Phelan and Gibson (1986) found that one high school's prevention measures, including hiring parent liaisons, helped to improve these students' retention rates. Results of school programs featuring parent liaisons also have included increased parent involvement (Halford, 1996; Kirschenbaum, 1999; Lewis, 2000; Lindeman, 2002). Aparicio-Clark and Dorris (2006) credited bilingual liaisons with increasing the involvement of families with limited English proficiency. Howland, Anderson, Smiley, and Abbott (2006) reported that parent liaisons helped to increase the involvement of families of children with special needs. The authors stated,

While parents reported receiving emotional encouragement from the liaisons as well as from a parent support group led by one of the liaisons . . . there is also clear evidence of the liaisons providing assistance to parents in interpreting and navigating the special education system. (p. 57)

This support and encouragement positively influenced families' parental role construction and self-efficacy, which have been theoretically and empirically linked to increased parent involvement (Hoover-Dempsey, Walker, & Sandler, 2005).

Several authors highlighted the importance of the entire school staff supporting the work of liaisons (Moles, 1996; Office of Educational Research, 1994; U.S. Department of Education, 2007). They also emphasized the importance of a clear job description, training, and accountability to ensure that liaisons effectively assist schools in their partnership efforts. For example, a 2007 U.S. Department of Education report stated,

Liaison training is important for ensuring that liaisons are effective communicators with parents and have a clear understanding of the sometimes very technical information they need to communicate or about which they may be asked, such as matters related to school performance. . . . In addition, training can help liaisons better define their role, can ensure greater consistency in the work of liaisons across schools, and can plant the seeds for an informal mutual-support network among liaisons within a district or region. (p. 19)

Despite growing awareness of and interest in parent liaisons, few studies have documented how liaisons can be trained, integrated into comprehensive school-based programs of partnership, and held accountable for reaching out to students and families placed at risk. To address this gap, I describe how one district¹ developed and continued to implement a structured liaison program.

Method

Design

This study is part of an ongoing longitudinal qualitative study of district leadership for school, family, and community partnerships in which I seek to answer the following research questions:

1. How do districts provide leadership and support for partnership program development?
2. How are schools' partnership teams and programs influenced by district leadership activities?

Districts participating in the study are members of the National Network of Partnership Schools (NNPS). NNPS was established in 1996 to build the capacity of school, district, and state educational leaders to develop comprehensive and permanent school, family, and community partnership programs. When districts and states join NNPS, in addition to coordinating partnership programs at their respective levels, they facilitate the development of school-level partnership programs. This facilitation may include activities such as leadership-training workshops, small incentive grants, and end-of-year partnership celebrations. District leaders also are guided to conduct regular meetings with school-based partnership teams. These teams are responsible for planning, implementing, and evaluating school-level partnership programs by using Epstein's framework of six types of involvement (Epstein et al., 2002).²

In the present study, I used a multiple-case study design that included four districts. Data collection in two of the four districts (Districts 1 and 2) began in August 2004, another district was added in 2005, and the final district was added in 2006. I selected districts on the basis of three primary criteria measured by responses on the annual NNPS evaluative survey, UPDATE: (a) level of district leadership, (b) level of school facilitation, and (c) length of membership in NNPS. Because of their greater likelihood to yield useful insights, I considered only district members who reported high levels of leadership (i.e., conducting 8 or more of the 13 leadership activities measured) in the 2003 UPDATE survey and who had been members of NNPS for 3 or more consecutive years.

I selected districts that varied in their levels of school facilitation so that I could examine whether and how this activity affected the quality of the schools' partnership programs. I selected the final four case districts to ensure variation along key demographic characteristics, such as location (i.e., rural, urban, suburban), school size, and socioeconomic and racial and ethnic makeup of the student population. During their initial year of participation, selected districts received \$1,500 for partnership activities. Districts received \$1,000 for each subsequent year of involvement. Costs related to the grant were provided by the Center on School, Family, and Community Partnerships at Johns Hopkins University.

Although the broader goal of this multiyear, multicase study is to understand the role of district leaders in bringing school, family, and community partnerships to scale, data collection over time has resulted in more focused studies of partnership program development. For example, research conducted in District 1 has generated a report (Sanders, in press-a) on how district leaders use data in partnership program development. Research conducted in

District 3 has generated a report (Sanders, in press-b) on the district's collaborative relationship with a community-based organization to support parent engagement. In the present study, I highlight the role of parent liaisons in partnership program development in District 1.

Data Collection

Findings reported in this study resulted from 3 years of data collection in District 1, which had been a member of NNPS for nearly 10 years. District 1 is located in a racially and ethnically diverse suburb of about 248,000 residents. According to the 2000 U.S. Census, 74% of the population was European American, 14% was African American, 8% was Asian, and 3% was Hispanic. Of the adult population, 93% graduated from high school, and 53% had a bachelor's or higher degree. Approximately 14% of the population spoke English as a second language. Median family income in the district was about \$74,000; 4% of the population lived below poverty level. The district was composed of about 70 elementary, middle, and high schools.

Data collection in District 1 included (a) phenomenological, semistructured, and informal interviews with the district specialist for family and community involvement; (b) semistructured interviews with the specialist's former supervisor; and (c) two focus-group interviews and informal conversations with parent liaisons. Data collection also included (d) observations of workshops, meetings, presentations, and other work-related activities of key district-level respondents and (e) collection and review of district- and school-level documents, including flyers, meeting agendas, and yearly action plans for partnerships, evaluations, and reports (see Appendix A). In addition, the study included (f) a survey evaluating liaison practices. In all, 30 families receiving liaison services completed the survey at an end-of-year awards breakfast in spring 2007 (see Table 1).

To understand how schools' partnership teams and programs were influenced by district leadership activities, I visited four schools in the district in 2006. The district specialist recommended them as examples of schools demonstrating progress on school, family, and community partnerships. Site visits included (a) a review of partnership action plans and related documents and (b) semistructured and focus-group interviews with school principals, family, and teacher representatives on school partnership teams. Schools participating in the site visits received \$500 for partnership activities.

Data Analysis

I conducted and recorded all formal interviews and transcribed them with Microsoft Word, except when student research assistants were available and transcribed the interviews. The interviews were then compiled in notebooks created for each participating district for case-specific analysis. The formal coding process began as transcribed

TABLE 1. Demographic Information of Survey Respondents

Variable	Description	% of total
Age range	20–40 years	41
	40–60 years	45
	More than 60 years	14
Race	African American/Black	97
	Hispanic/non-White	1
Education	No high school diploma	11
	GED/high school diploma	29
	Some college or beyond	60
Relationship to child	Mother	57
	Grandmother	36
	Other relative	7
Number of children	1	28
	2	29
	3	25
	4 or more	18
Years with liaison	0–1 year	37
	2–3 years	33
	4 or more years	30

interviews became available. The coding process was both deductive and inductive (Hatch, 2002). During *deductive coding*, I read the transcribed interview to gain a general impression of the information shared. I then reread the transcribed interview and highlighted phrases and passages that corresponded to codes (see Appendix B) that were created on the basis of a review of the literature on district leadership and family involvement, as well as the study's overarching research questions.

Inductive coding occurred during the third reading when I applied terms to recurring leadership activities and themes. Among the themes that emerged through this process were family liaisons. I coded this theme independently and as a subtheme for five of the initial codes: data, district leadership, parent involvement, partnership program development, and school outreach. The inductive analyses guided further interviewee selection and interview focus. In this way, data collection and analyses were iterative processes that allowed me to explore (a) the larger research questions on district leadership and school partnership quality and (b) more focused questions on specific leadership activities for school, family, and community partnerships.

Student research assistants and I loaded Microsoft Word files containing the transcribed interviews into Ethnograph, version 5.0, and coded the files according to my handwritten codes. Ethnograph enabled easier cross-case analyses and identification of quotations to illustrate common themes across and within cases. I plan to report the results of cross-case analyses that focused on the study's primary research questions in a future article.

I also coded observation and informal interview notes and documents collected for review and filed in the appropriate district notebooks. I coded survey data and conducted descriptive analyses with SPSS version 12.0. These multiple

sources and types of data were needed to generate a credible and sufficiently detailed account of districts' partnership efforts, including liaison programs. I shared the present findings with participants to receive their feedback and as an additional check on the accuracy of the information.

Program and District Background

Awarding-Winning District Program of Partnerships

District 1 was honored by NNPS for its work on school, family, and community partnerships. The district has sustained its program for nearly 10 years, despite changes in superintendents and district office restructuring. The district specialist for family and community involvement communicated and collaborated with colleagues in several departments who were members of the district's leadership team for partnerships. She also worked with the district's 12 partnership schools to help them form partnership teams, write annual partnership plans, and implement partnership activities to promote student success. In addition, the district specialist helped to coordinate and evaluate community-based learning centers that provided after-school programs for more than 100 children and families. These centers provided help with homework, resources for studying, enrichment activities, and support for families. Furthermore, the specialist developed several tools to strengthen partnerships in the district, including a quarterly newsletter, a multiple-intelligence checklist for parents to share information with schools about their children's learning styles, and home-school communication guidelines for teachers. The specialist also supervised and provided professional development to the district's parent liaisons, who supported family involvement in several partnership schools in the district.

District Family Liaisons

"The Family and Community Outreach Parent Liaisons serve as a resource of support for schools and families in the establishment of effective home-school partnerships for student learning and achievement" (District Liaison Handbook¹, 2004). The parent liaison program was developed in 2001 as part of the specialist's efforts to support schools and families in helping children meet the district's high academic standards. Liaisons are placed in Title I schools that also are members of NNPS. The liaison position is part-time. The initial three liaisons represented a variety of professional backgrounds and worked 6 hr/week. However, the program evolved so that, at the time of the study, the 10 liaisons generally had degrees in education, social work, or related fields and worked 10 hr/week. The district specialist found that, with appropriate training, individuals who had knowledge and skills in these professional areas could provide the broadest and most comprehensive level of support for the schools' partnership efforts. Others have observed a similar trend of districts' employing liaisons with professional backgrounds in education and related fields (e.g., Henderson, Mapp, Johnson, & Davies, 2007).

Liaisons received professional development through monthly meetings that covered topics such as Epstein's (Epstein et al., 2002) framework of six types of involvement, the role and function of school-based partnership teams, the role of families in children's learning, differences between empowerment and deficit approaches to family outreach, district goals for family involvement, and other topics generated by the liaisons through evaluation forms completed at the end of each meeting. Liaisons also had to complete a weekly log of their outreach activities organized according to Epstein's framework of six types of involvement and develop regular updates on the families they served.

Results

Role of Liaisons

Parent support is not as fuzzy an area as we think. With good intentions, persistence, and tested strategies that have worked over time, it can be an incredible opportunity to engage and empower parents to support schools and impact student learning. (Liaison-produced document, 2006)

I identified four essential roles undertaken by parent liaisons that helped schools in District 1 to minimize the influence of class and cultural differences in home-school relations. The liaisons provided (a) direct services to families placed at risk, (b) support for teacher outreach, (c) support for school-based partnership teams, and (d) data for program improvement.

Direct Services to Families Placed at Risk

Throughout this study, the district specialist trained and supervised, on average, 9 parent liaisons who each worked

with approximately 122 focus families in the district's lowest performing schools. The specialist, liaisons, and school administrators selected focus families primarily on the basis of the academic performance of the children and perceived need. Preference was given to low-income families with children who were performing below grade level in reading and mathematics. As described in a document produced by the district's family and community outreach specialist, other criteria included the following:

- a family whose child had an absentee rate of 20% or more;
- a family whose child had inconsistent rates of homework completion; and
- a family that appeared to be disenfranchised or alienated from the school.

In a 2004 focus group, parent liaisons described their support for focus families in the following ways:

As parent liaisons, we give parents the tools that they need to communicate with teachers and administrators. It might begin with our accompanying a parent to a parent-teacher conference and being there with that parent and sitting there with that parent. Eventually, they'll be able to go by themselves. (Liaison 1, Focus Group 1)³

We are maybe the very first people that these parents are meeting who say to them, "You know, we believe in you. We support you, we know that you just need a little help right now." (Liaison 2, Focus Group 1)

According to liaison focus groups and reports, this direct support provided parents with the information and support needed to negotiate the intricacies of the school system and minimize the knowledge gap that can corrupt home-school relations for poor and minority families. Additional reported results for focus families included greater levels of involvement in children's education at home and school, higher levels of home-school communication, and more positive feelings toward schools and school personnel.

Although not statistically representative of all focus families in the district, survey results from 30 of these families corroborated liaison reports. Responses to the Likert-type questions ranging from 1 (*completely agree*) to 4 (*disagree*), which I reverse coded so that 4 was the most favorable response, showed that parents evaluated the liaisons positively. Liaisons were rated particularly high on availability to families when needed (3.68), providing services to meet family needs (3.67), and overall satisfaction with their assistance to families (3.79; see Table 2).

Of the survey respondents, 21 answered the open-ended question, "Has a liaison helped you or a family member? If yes, please describe." Listed in order of frequency, the respondents reported the following four areas of assistance: (a) academic support, (b) encouragement and moral support, (c) support in connecting with school and community resources, and (d) material support. One third of the parents reported that the liaisons helped them understand how to support their children's learning. One parent reported,

TABLE 2. Means and Standard Deviations of Survey Responses for Likert-type^a Items

Item	M	SD
The liaison helped support children's learning at home.	3.25	0.89
The liaison helped me to understand what my child is learning in math and reading.	3.25	0.89
The liaison helped me to better understand my child's learning needs.	3.36	0.87
The liaison helped me to better understand school rules and operations.	3.07	1.04
The liaison was available to me when I needed him/her.	3.68	0.48
The liaison provided needed services for my family.	3.67	0.55
I am happy that my family has a liaison.	3.79	0.50

^aScale ranged from 1 (*completely agree*) to 4 (*disagree*).

"The liaison has helped me to enhance and monitor my nephew's progress. I could not have functioned without her assistance. She is God sent." Another wrote, "The liaison has helped me to understand where my child needs help and how to best support my child's efforts."

An almost equal number of parents identified encouragement and moral support as important forms of assistance; for example, one parent wrote, "The liaison has been a gem to my son and myself. She always encourages me and when I was on bedrest with my last child, she was very accommodating."

Families also reported that liaisons supported their connection with the school and larger community. One parent explained,

She played the middle person in helping me communicate with the school staff about special services that my children needed in order to help them become better students. . . . She makes sure that all of my children receive the extra education services that they need and resources for homework and any class projects. She also makes house calls to make sure that I remember all events that I need to attend and to remind me of activities that we are supposed to participate in.

Last, a few parents discussed the importance of the material resources the liaisons provided to their families. Swick (1999) argued that this type of support is especially important for families facing economic or personal crises before discussions of school-related engagement can take place. According to one mother,

My liaison has assisted my family with dealing with our financial and living issues. We are currently homeless and living in a motel. She has assisted with a refrigerator, Crock Pot, and food on a few occasions. For that we are truly grateful.

Support for Teacher Outreach

Because of a lack of experience and professional development, many teachers do not have the skills, knowledge, and dispositions necessary to effectively partner with cul-

turally diverse parents. For example, in a study of 160 secondary education preservice and in-service teachers, DeCastro-Ambrosetti and Cho (2005) found that teachers often blame students' parents and home for culturally and linguistically diverse students' low academic performance. The authors concluded, "As long as this rift between home and school exists, communication between parents and teachers will continue to be strained and hindered" (p. 45). One liaison, a former teacher, described the gap in home-school communication:

As educators, we often want to get out our message—that is what we are focused on. We are not focused on the receivers of the message, the families. They need support in hearing the message so that we can both support the student. (Liaison 1, Focus Group 2)

Liaisons in this study supported teachers in reaching out to the families of diverse students by acting as cultural interpreters and by modeling outreach strategies that helped to build teachers' capacity for partnerships. In the following excerpts, parent liaisons describe each of these roles in turn:

We have a role—we interpret culture—we're cultural interpreters. Often, the teachers would come to me and say, "Well, what did it mean when he said this or that?" And, I'm usually able to tell them. And they'll say, "Oh, because I heard that phrase before, but I didn't know." So, you know, they want to know. I absolutely believe they want to do their best—the staff, the people at school—but I think that sometimes they're caught because they don't really understand and so we become interpreters for them. (Liaison 7, Focus Group 1)

Sometimes they'll come to me and they may want me to make a phone call for them, but I will in turn model how they should make that phone call. I tell them, "I think it's important that she hear it from you as the math teacher why it's important for her child to be in this after-school program. If she hears it from you, it's much more meaningful than if it comes from me." And I let teachers know that by reaching out and making phone calls themselves, it gives

them an opportunity to talk with this parent and build some type of relationship so that the next time they have to call about something else, the parent will know the teacher is not just calling because the child acted up in class. (Liaison 8, Focus Group 1, 2004)

By acting as cultural interpreters and modeling and encouraging family outreach, liaisons helped teachers to become boundary crossers and reach out to families who might otherwise have been left in the margins of the school community. According to one liaison (Focus Group 2), "I've had teachers tell me I've made a difference, and that is a good thing to hear." Another liaison summarized her impact in the following way:

We have really made a difference from the teacher perspective because many of our families were the hard to reach—the tough nuts to crack. The teachers are so appreciative because they couldn't reach the families before and now they have access because we help them to connect. (Liaison 5, Focus Group 2)

Support for School-Based Partnership Teams

Parent liaisons also worked with school partnership teams to conduct schoolwide activities that were accessible and relevant to the families of all students. In the four schools I visited, partnership team members, including the school principals, underscored the important role that parent liaisons played in providing family support, implementing family outreach, and garnering greater parent involvement for students' school success.

For example, on the basis of the insights and perspectives offered by the parent liaison, one school's partnership team decided to hold a family-reading activity in the meeting room of an apartment building where many students and families resided. Another school's partnership team decided to implement activities specifically for Latino families because their attendance at schoolwide events was low. These well-attended activities—which created a safe space for Latino families to learn more about school programs, share information and concerns, and network with other families and school personnel—were led by the parent liaison who was fluent in Spanish.

One team chairperson enthusiastically described the impact of her school's parent liaison as follows:

Suzanne has been here about 2–3 years . . . and she is marvelous—fantastic! She is somebody who keeps in close contact with parents. She has a personal relationship with many of the parents. She can call at night and reach them when she can't reach them during the day. She is going to contact every student we have invited to our pizza party for reading. She does so many things that I don't even know about. She is very instrumental in helping us keep in close contact with all our families.

Liaisons also described their membership on school partnership teams as a critical aspect of their work.

Our team chooses something from the Epstein model each year to create the theme, "What are we going to focus on? Is

it volunteering or is it going to be parent involvement?" The Title I teacher and I, we're the ones who run the meetings, and everyone who wants to know anything about the team comes to us. If anyone has a different school team that they are building, they'll come to us and we will present it to the partnership team to decide how we're going to partner with them so we can support them. (Liaison 6, Focus Group 1)

I have found at my school that I am always asked to be on the committee that deals with families. The faculty and staff now will say, "Let's get her on the student support team, the partnership team . . ." because of my relationship with families and the community. (Liaison 1, Focus Group 2)

In some cases, liaisons were the impetus for partnership team development:

I tell them, "We really aren't doing what other schools are doing, and it really makes a difference at those other schools when they have a partnership team." And last year, I did pull us a partnership team together and we did get an action plan because I went to them and I said, "Look, we have to fill this out. We have to write down that we are doing things." (Liaison 4, Focus Group 1)

Data for Program Improvement

The district specialist sought to capture the role and impact of the liaisons through the systematic collection, compilation, review, and dissemination of data. As previously described, each liaison had to complete a weekly activity report that described focus family and school outreach activities organized according to Epstein's framework of six types of involvement (Epstein et al., 2002). Liaisons also were required to collect achievement and attendance data for targeted students in the focus families. In addition, liaisons collected assessment data at the beginning of the school year and end of each grading period to track student progress over the school year. Under the direction and supervision of the district specialist, a selected liaison or program assistant worked 4 additional hr in each month to collect and compile the data for analysis and dissemination.

In addition to tracking student achievement data, the district specialist encouraged parent liaisons and school-based partnership teams to collect and analyze demographic data not only for students but also for their families and communities. The district specialist encouraged parent liaisons especially to have deep understanding and knowledge of their focus families so that they could provide wraparound services to help these families better support their children's learning. Parent liaisons collected data on families' financial, health, and emotional needs and concerns. Parent liaisons documented and discussed these data in monthly meetings to identify additional resources and actions that could further aid the families.

The data-collection process was continually reviewed, adapted, and refined by the specialist and the liaisons. Participants in my focus-group interviews emphasized the importance of the data to the quality of home-school

partnerships. One liaison discussed how her in-depth knowledge of one focus family helped the school to better identify and support a student's learning needs and his father's engagement in his learning. She stated,

I had a parent who we didn't know at the beginning of the year. We knew that his son was not completing his homework and was falling behind academically. The father was not available for a parent-teacher conference. By my talking to [the father] regularly, I learned that he went to school full-time, he was at work full-time, and Friday was his day off. So, "Well, why don't we use Friday." So we used Friday for him to meet with the teacher. From that conference, [the teacher] learned that [the father] was working all of this time and that his son really didn't have anyone to spend any time with, so when he comes to school, that's why he's so needy. So it just helped the teacher learn more about what's going on in their family, and now they're looking for a big brother or some type of mentor to spend time with him. But I mean, had we not had that dialogue, we never would have known that. And everybody wins in the end. The teacher is pleased, and . . . [the student] is turning in his homework because his dad knows exactly what he's supposed to be doing. (Liaison 3, Focus Group 1)

Another liaison explained how providing data to contextualize the lives of students and their families helped teachers to be more responsive to students and less inclined to stereotype or prejudice students' families. She stated,

I know the family situation; I know that mama has lost her job, she's having hardship with providing for the family, and she may not have had a complete dinner for the child last night, or he may have come into school and not have had breakfast because, you know, with everything that's going on, he came in late. He's unable to function at school because instead of focusing on schoolwork, his stomach is growling. So, without the liaisons there to fill in those pieces that a teacher would not ordinarily do, I think we would lose out on a lot. And, academically, it would impact the school as a whole because if this child does not come to school with a full stomach ready to learn, we're not going to get anything from him. (Liaison 4, Focus Group 1)

The achievement data gathered by the liaisons and their activity reports provided the specialist with important leverage to acquire the funds necessary to expand the liaison program. She explained,

In 2001, I had three liaisons at \$10 per hour for 6 hours a week. Each year because we showed successful maintenance of effort and a continuous increase in NNPS school members, the amount of funding increased and is now \$95,000. We had nine liaisons for each of our NNPS schools. That worked until last year—one school does not have a liaison, but everyone knows it is due to the budget. I'm trying to garner political support from principals and teachers so that they will stand up and say we need more parent liaison services. I am trying to come up with the data that they want to see to support what I am asking for. The liaisons have data that they don't know they have.

To achieve her aims, the specialist sent each principal a quarterly summary of the data reported by the liaison assigned to his or her school, including the number of parent contacts made by liaisons, types of contacts made, and

achievement data for targeted students. During monthly meetings, she also shared these data with her department director and colleagues. These reports helped her affirm to liaisons the importance of data collection in their work. One liaison commented that the use of the data was unclear and "then I saw it on a chart in a meeting that I was attending and I said to myself, 'I have to go and complete this month's report'" (Liaison 2, Focus Group 2). The data have shown the program's connection to student achievement, which a reorganization of the district required all offices to do. At the time of the study, additional funds to expand the liaison program to more schools in the district and to increase liaison hours in participating schools were still needed. The data helped to legitimate the specialist's request for these funds.

Discussion

Recommendations for Practice

Investigation of the case district's parent liaison program highlighted three practical suggestions for other districts that seek to begin or improve liaison programs.

Ensure sufficient funding. Districts must identify sufficient funds to provide liaisons with the time necessary to carry out their varied tasks, which includes time for (a) direct engagement with targeted students and their families, (b) assistance with teacher and school outreach, (c) monthly activity and family progress reports, and (d) liaisons' ongoing professional development. These tasks often overlap and should be included in any parent liaison job description. They are demanding tasks that require time in the school building, in the larger community, and in professional-development settings so liaisons can stay abreast of school and district policies and procedures, community activities and resources for children and families, and research and best practice in school, family, and community partnerships. Therefore, school systems must understand the importance of the liaison position in its overall goals for family engagement and student achievement and progress and must fund it accordingly.

Identify and train qualified personnel. Liaison activities are, as one district liaison described, "relational" work (see also Howland, Anderson, Smiley, & Abbott, 2006). Relationships take time to build and are dependent on trust and effective communication. Whereas this study and others (see Henderson, Mapp, Johnson, & Davies, 2007) highlight the importance of liaisons' having professional experience in education or related fields, equally important is a professional and personal perspective that values and respects families and their roles in home-school partnerships. The selection and training of liaisons must emphasize the importance of such a view and build the capacity of liaisons to cross racial, ethnic, income, or experiential differences to build relationships that support their professional goals and responsibilities.

Provide adequate support. Liaisons must be supported in their work by their colleagues and supervisors (Moles, 1996; Office of Educational Research, 1994; U.S. Department of Education, 2007). Liaisons generally report that their work is rewarding, but it is not easy. Liaisons often work with poor, marginalized, or alienated families. Because the liaisons are employed by schools and districts, they can be viewed as part of a bureaucracy that is inaccessible and ineffective. Without proper support from school and district personnel, including a philosophy and policy of partnerships, funding, flexibility, time, and professional development and encouragement, liaisons may feel fractured or torn between competing interests (Martinez-Cosio & Iannacone, 2007), and their effectiveness and long-term commitment may be diminished. Commitment over time is especially important because liaisons may have to work for years before the fruits of their labor are fully realized. One liaison noted that it took 4 years before families in her school fully understood her mission and purpose. She observed, "This fourth year my reputation is established. They see me as a trustworthy person in the school. Now, parents come to me and seek me out when they want to discuss academic support for their child. It feels great." Without district and school support for and understanding of the significance of partnerships for student achievement and well-being, the liaison may not have been able to achieve her new level of success.

Conclusion

Many districts have hired parent liaisons to create more positive interactions between students' homes and schools. Although studies show that such personnel can make a positive difference, few have identified how and why. In this article, I describe the role that liaisons can play in helping schools to learn more about their families and challenge assumptions about race and class that negatively affect home-school relations. By providing (a) direct services to families who are at risk, (b) support for teacher outreach, (c) support for school-based partnership teams, and (d) data for program improvement, parent liaisons in the case district have encouraged greater parent involvement.

This study further shows the importance of district leadership to ensure that liaisons are prepared to carry out their essential work and to document their influence in partnership program development. District leadership and support are especially important for underresourced schools that often direct the professional responsibilities of parent liaisons away from family outreach activities to other school-based activities. Thus, this case district offers a model to other districts whose educators seek to improve family involvement and home-school relations in their schools.

NOTES

1. The name and location of the school district are not included to maintain the confidentiality of all participants.
2. For more information, visit <http://www.partnershipschoools.org>.

3. Individual statements made by liaisons in Focus Groups 1 (2004) and 2 (2007) are numbered instead of named to ensure anonymity.

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APPENDIX A
Data Sources for District 1

- Interviews/focus groups
- NNPS key
 - Contact/district community specialist
 - Former district superintendent and supervisor of NNPS
 - Key-contact parent liaisons
 - Focus families (survey)
 - School-based team
- Observations
- Parent liaison meetings for partnerships
 - Outreach conferences
 - End-of-year celebrations
 - 21st Century community
 - Site visits
 - Partnership policy
- Document review
- District Web site
 - School Action Plans
 - Department documents
 - Workshop materials
 - Meeting agendas
 - Parent liaison forms
 - Parent involvement partnership leader
 - NNPS UPDATE survey and membership forms
-

Note. NNPS = National Network of Partnership Schools.

APPENDIX B
Initial Codes

CD LINK: community–district linkage
CLUSTER: cluster meetings
COLL: collaboration
DATA: data type
DATA USE: data use
DEPTH: reform understanding
DLEAD: district leadership
DSUP: district support
EDUEXCEL: educational excellence
FLEAD: facilitator role
FUND: funding
NNPS: National Network of Partnership Schools
OWN: reform ownership
PARENT: parental roles
PARINVOL: parent involvement
PLEAD: parent leadership
PNTWK: parent networking
PPD: partnership program development
PRIN: principal
PRINLEAD: principal leadership
PTRAIN: parent training
REACH: school and district outreach
SCHFX: school effects
SOCCAP: social capital
SPREAD: reform expansion
SQUAL: school quality
SUPT: superintendent
SUSTAIN: reform sustainability
UNIONS: role of teacher unions
XSUPP: additional supports for partnership program development

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