

## **Rodney B. Cox Elementary School: A Small Town, Full Service School Pasco County Public Schools Dade City, Florida**

### **Overview**

To design and implement a parent involvement program around family needs, Rodney B. Cox Elementary School is becoming a full service school that will provide dental care, counseling, and health care to students and their families, with additional services available by referral. Recently, the school constructed a new building on its campus to house some of these services, along with a parent involvement office and offices for migrant student recruiters. Parents participated in the design of the building and in the overall plans for what services would be provided. School faculty work toward involving parents in the school's academic programs in order to increase child and family literacy. To do this, the school offers parents numerous workshops on topics ranging from literacy to how to use manipulatives with children at home. This year, Cox began to offer two GED classes, funded through state adult education programs, with books and materials funded by Title I.

### **Context**

Cox is the oldest school in Pasco County, and many of its students are the second or third generation in their family to have attended the school. Although the community shares many characteristics with urban areas, it is located approximately 30 miles north of Tampa in a semi-rural, small town. Cox has implemented a schoolwide program, and enrolls 512 students in grades preK-5. Ninety-three percent of students enrolled are eligible for free or reduced price lunches. Migrant students make up 21 percent of the school population, and there is a 56 percent mobility rate among students. The migrant families typically arrive at the school in mid-October and leave in mid-April. They work at a large citrus-packing plant near the school and also in nearby fields picking fruits and vegetables.

Forty percent of students at Cox Elementary are African American, 44 percent are Hispanic (many of whom are limited English proficient), and 16 percent are white. All students live within a two-mile radius of the school, and most live in two nearby low-income housing projects. Many parents do not read or write well themselves, although, the principal notes, they have high hopes for their children and want them to succeed in school.

### **Breaking Down Barriers to Family Involvement in Schools**

Cox faces two major barriers to parental involvement: (1) parents' lack of transportation and telephones, which makes communication between the home and school difficult in this rural community, and (2) parents' negative perception of school in general, which they have revealed on yearly anonymous parent surveys. The principal and her staff

have found ways to minimize these obstacles and to help families build the base of support they need to dedicate time and energy to their children's education.

### **Overcoming Time and Resource Constraints**

Many of the school's efforts focus on overcoming both the isolation and the economic hardship faced by many parents. Cox finds home visits by teachers and other staff an excellent way to reach parents who lack telephones or adequate transportation, and the staff also recognize that meeting other family needs, such as those for meals and child care, are effective strategies for attracting parents to school functions.

Outreach strategies to keep parents informed. About 20 percent of Cox students have telephones in their homes, and many families have no car. To help parents get the information they need about their children's school life, Cox requires teachers to make quarterly home visits; in fact, most teachers exceed this requirement. Although teachers do not receive extra pay for the home visits, the principal says that teachers see the value in making the effort to reach out to parents and scheduling the time for these visits. Most often, the parent involvement coordinator takes teachers to the homes of students after school. In addition, the full-time parent involvement coordinator and the migrant recruiters enhance communications by obtaining necessary parent signatures, recruiting parents for school committees and councils, and driving parents and teachers to ensure their presence at conferences or medical referrals arranged by the school staff.

The principal discovered that parent participation increases at school meetings when a meal is provided. Parents who volunteer at school during the day also receive a free lunch, which is paid for by fund-raising events and vending profits. In addition, as an added incentive, many school events are followed by a performance given by the students.

*More teacher time to communicate with families.* The school encourages parents to drop in to see teachers during their daily planning time, 8:00 to 9:00 a.m., as well as throughout the school day. Teachers can use their 45-minute special period (during physical education, art, music, or media) to meet with parents. The principal ensures that there is enough support staff available to cover classes if a parent needs to meet with a teacher. "We don't ever want parents to feel unwelcome here, even if I have to go cover a class myself," she said.

### **Providing Information and Training to Parents and School Staff**

Cox has made a concerted effort to dispel parents' negative images of school by offering events to make them feel welcome, providing parents with training on how to work with their children at home, and by training staff to support parents' efforts to work with their children.

*Training parents to support learning at home.* The school provides monthly events for families that include "make and take programs" as well as workshops; each of these events attracts 60 to 200 parents. This year, at the parents' request, the monthly programs will

alternate, with one session being held in the evening and the next taking place in the afternoon to accommodate parents' different work schedules. Bilingual teachers attend each meeting to translate for Spanish-speaking family members. These sessions include a preparation night for the Stanford Achievement Test (which is the test the district uses for all students in grades 2-5), an open house, spelling contests, speech contests, Primary Reading Intervention (a reading program for first and second graders), game night, multi-cultural night, and authors' day (an event when students present books they have created). Committees consisting of teachers and parents select the topics and events for these monthly programs.

Additional parent training for 1996-97 includes free adult education classes offered at Cox two days per week through the Moore Mickens Adult Education program. The principal expects that participating in these classes will help parents gain the self-confidence they need to feel comfortable helping their children with academics and interacting with school staff.

*Training staff to teach parents as well as students.* All teachers from Cox attended a workshop during the summer of 1996 called Parents Exploring Teaching and Learning Styles (PETALS). This three-day workshop for teachers taught them how to identify individual learning styles so that teachers can then help both parents and students learn while having fun. A reading specialist who participated said that as a result of this workshop, "You understand why one person approaches learning one way and another approaches the same material in another way. That is important for teachers." Teachers have found the PETALS training useful both in the classroom and in working with parents.

### **Restructuring Schools to Support Family Involvement**

According to the principal, her greatest challenge is making it possible for parents to interact comfortably with school staff. To help parents feel more comfortable, the school makes special efforts to meet their needs and communicate with them.

*Designing parent involvement around family needs.* In response to the high rate of poverty and mobility among the migrant population, beginning with the 1996-97 academic year, Cox became a full-service school, capable of providing dental care, counseling, and health care to students and their families. Recently a new building where some of these services will be available was completed on the school's campus. Additional services will be available by referral. Parents participated in the design of the building, which houses the nurse and the health paraprofessional, the dentist, a parent involvement office, and migrant student recruiters. The building provides a kitchen for students and adults to use. School leaders hope that offering these health and social services to families will allow students to concentrate on achieving success in school.

In addition, Cox' School Advisory Council (SAC), composed of the principal, teachers, parents, and community members, regularly surveys all parents and school staff to identify the school's needs. Surveys taken during the 1995-96 school year identified the following as strategies to implement by 1998:

- Offer parents computer training at the school
- Publish a monthly newsletter
- Send a daily communications folder home with students so that parents can keep current on their children's work
- Inform parents about programs and schoolwide activities by using bilingual flier (in English and Spanish), an outdoor sign, the monthly newsletter, and the local television news, WCOX
- Record parent volunteer hours with the goal of increasing the time parents spend at the school
- Organize the business community to sponsor Career Clubs through which students can explore potential careers

*Dedicating resources to building school-family communication.* Several school and district employees serve as liaison function between the school and parents. For example, the school employs a full-time parent involvement coordinator, who is a certified teacher with no classroom responsibilities. He assists classroom teachers in their efforts to promote and encourage parental involvement. Teachers who don't wish to make home visits by themselves can request that he accompany them on their visits. The parent involvement coordinator also leads an activity he designed to help build students' self-esteem and to promote strong morale among all members of the school community. Each week he takes pictures of paraprofessionals, parents, and teachers as they interact with students. These pictures are published by a local newspaper, along with a brief caption identifying them and describing what they do at the school and outside the school.

“[It is important] to create a comfort level that [will allow parents] to freely verbalize their concerns....”

Principal, Rodney B. Cox Elementary School

*Including parents in school decision-making.* In response to the new Title I requirement for school-parent compacts, the Cox SAC reviewed several other schools' compacts before designing their own. The goals for students, parents, and teachers during the upcoming year are outlined in the compact. For example, students agree to attend school and arrive on time, maintain a positive attitude, and respect themselves and the rights of others. The Cox staff accepts its responsibility not only to provide an orderly classroom and a high-quality instructional program that meets students' needs but also to assist families in meeting their children's needs. Parents accept the responsibility to send their children to school, check their work regularly, and communicate with teachers and students. The compact is signed each year, and recent student test scores are written on the top so that parents can assess their children's progress.

“At first it was difficult to get the parents to school unless there was a problem. They now see that we are not just providing a service; they are a vital part of their children’s education...It is what we want.”

Reading specialist, Rodney B. Cox Elementary School

### **Evidence of Success**

During the 1995-96 school year 74 adults registered to serve as volunteers at Cox. The parent involvement coordinator reports that 10 to 20 of these registered volunteers work on campus each day. In addition, Cox Elementary has begun monitoring parent involvement, and it reports consistently high levels of both family and school staff participation for monthly parental and community involvement events. For example, up to 200 parents participate in workshops each month.

Student test scores on the Stanford Achievement Test have increased over the past two years. In the 1994-95 school year, 31 percent of students scored at about the 50<sup>th</sup> percentile in math and 14 percent scored at that level in reading. In 1995-96, 61 percent of students scored above the 50<sup>th</sup> percentile in math and 34 percent scored above the 50<sup>th</sup> percentile in reading.

