

CRITICAL BEGINNINGS: CREATING SCHOOL COMMUNITY
FOR ALL CHILDREN AND FAMILIES

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(Abstract)

Ernest Boyer's *The Basic School: A Community for Learning* (1995) aligns with other important research and programs that encourage parent involvement to maximize each child's educational potential. The purpose of this qualitative study was to understand and to document the first steps undertaken by one school as it began to address Boyer's *school as community* priority by reaching out to an uninvolved parent population. Meaning was constructed from the perspective of the researcher who was an active participant in the process. Research questions included: 1) What happened when one school began to address the needs of its at-risk population by intentionally reaching out to involve the parents of these students in the life of the school? 2) How was this accomplished within the context of a school beginning to address the priorities of a "Basic School?" 3) What structures were created to facilitate the process and guide its progress?

Teachers in the *School as Community Family* at Kizer Elementary School¹ were the initial focus of this study. Additional groups with related purposes became part of the inquiry as the process unfolded. Transcripts, field notes, and related documents were collected from all relevant group meetings and outreach activities from June of 1997 through January of 1998. The

¹ To protect the privacy of individuals, all persons and places including the university referred to in the study were given pseudonyms.

process of data analysis yielded descriptive conceptual models and an interpretive narrative case study that follows a modified chronology of the communicative action steps undertaken by a group of educators readying themselves for outreach to an alienated parent population.

This study produced practical implications for schools wishing to begin the steps toward increasing the level of family and community engagement with student learning. A case was made for self-reflective action to create opportunities for authentic conversation that can empower families to take greater initiative in the public education of their children. If schools can learn to build, support and sustain relationships with parents, particularly their at-risk populations, they might expect a greater level of success in educating their children.

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DEDICATION

To the three beloved men in my life:

Jamie and Jon who bring music to my ears

And Lee who brings laughter to my heart.

To my mother and father:

Ann and Bill Ayres, who taught me the joys of learning and of service.

To the memory of my father-in-law:

Richard Talbot, who continues to make me proud of my new last name.

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PART ONE
THE CONTEXT

CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

An inquiry that hopes to realize a concept as obscure as *creating school community for children and families* requires a certain degree of definition to make that concept plain enough and palatable enough for contemplation. By beginning the report with an informal case essay, I have attempted to establish a local context for the later case study in a manner that will personalize the story and create an understanding of the circumstances leading to its necessity. This exposition will set the stage for the study by helping the reader to understand something about the setting, the people, and the culture in which this qualitative study took place.

An internship journal documenting my experience in two related roles has served as the sole source for this first chapter. From the fall of 1996 through the fall of 1997, I spent over 700 hours in two experiences that came to interact with and influence both this research project and one another greatly. Because of a long-time interest in developing sensitive and effective home visitation strategies as an elementary school counselor, I spent the first semester in an internship with the social worker for Larson County Public Schools² in the State of Virginia. Karen Dreyfus allowed me to follow, assist, and learn from her day-to-day activities as the school social worker with the responsibility to help families deal with issues that may be inhibiting a child's school attendance and success. Many of these activities led us to homes in the Forest Mountain community described in the pages that follow. During this same time period, I was fortunate also to work with Mr. Robert Walton, principal of Kizer Elementary School, as an administrative

² All persons and places referred to in the study have been given pseudonyms.

intern involved in a program designed to prepare me for the principalship. That school serves the children from the Forest Mountain community where I had followed Ms. Dreyfus on home visits many times. Children from a more affluent neighborhood known as Briarwood also attend school at Kizer.

Briarwood Meets Forest Mountain

The Children

“Mark”

Mark’s face is very pale. It reminds me of buttermilk. His mother says that’s because she can’t get him to eat any meat.

At the bottom of the porch steps, sit the remains of a Halloween scarecrow; old clothes stuffed with older clothes and torn up newspapers. There’s a torso and lower body and a face made out of the decaying head of a mop.

Inside Mom is making an attempt to clean the kitchen floor with a mop that is in a bit better shape. It seems more like she is scooting the grit around into a thinner layer so it isn’t quite so noticeable. Scraps and dirty dishes cover the counters, the table, a couple of chairs and part of the floor.

Baby brother toddles toward an open jug of sweet milk on the table and refills a cup for the third time. No telling how long the milk has been sitting there.

While Mom goes out to the car to have a meeting with the social worker from school, Mark tries to take charge of changing his brother’s dirty britches. He empties the feces into the

kitchen trash can, puts the underpants in a bucket in the bathroom and finds some cleaner ones to put on along with a pair of short green coveralls.

Another milky face looks up at me with outstretched arms. This one's rounder and encloses darker, more prominent eyes. I am ashamed to realize that I really do not want to hold this child in my lap. I just picked this suit up from the cleaners yesterday.

Later, Mom brings out a recent electric bill for something over \$1200. She laments her inability to pay. The bill is in her 13-year old daughter's name because she has already ruined her own credit with the electric company. There are obvious cracks around the door and windows letting in the cold as we speak.

The rental agency came last week and took back the boys' bunk beds. The cable has been cut off, but the kids manage to see a thing or two through the fuzz on the television set.

The school hassles her about getting Mark to class regularly and on time, but then sent him home three times last month because he was sick when he got there. She lost her job as a housekeeper at the college because of excessive tardiness and absenteeism of her own. It is just *so* hard to get out of bed.

“Matthew”

Matthew bounds down the stairs with palpable energy as he heads out the door to find his buddies down the street. Through the wide picture window I can see a green backyard filled with bikes, balls and a hefty wooden swing set. There is a trampoline in the corner. Through the back gate, the kids reach the bike path that takes them to the neighborhood swimming pool, the duck pond and the school playgrounds and gymnasium that are open to the public.

Matthew has a computer in his room. There is another in the family room downstairs. He puts his dirty clothes in the hamper and they are washed and returned to his drawer within a day or two.

After school twice a week, he goes to soccer practice. On Tuesday nights he has cub scouts and violin on Wednesdays. Before or after dinner (depending on the schedule of daily events), he sits at the kitchen table and works on homework alongside his older sister while Mom and Dad alternate between food preparation, clean-up and answering the incessant questions and complaints. Mom is a public school teacher. Dad is a computer administrator at the local university.

“Mary”

Mary has missed 93 days of school this year. A school that rarely encourages retention finds it difficult to recommend promotion under the circumstances. Fearing that holding her back will only hasten her resolve to drop out completely, they make the decision to retain her with some trepidation. They will encourage summer school as an option but doubt that she will attend.

Mary’s mom has been to court three times since February and each time was ordered to make sure that Mary and her seventh-grade brother are in school daily unless excused by a doctor. These events have each been followed by a few days of token attendance before dropping back to old habits.

Mom works at a convenience store. Dad is out of the picture and fresh out of jail. Mary and her brother received free eye examinations and glasses earlier in the year compliments of the local Lion’s club. The glasses are long gone. There is a nice, new-looking food processor on the counter along with a blender and toaster. The trailer is clean enough on the interior. Only a couple of piles of laundry await the weekly wash.

One day out of many that Mary's brother went to school this year, his class was running the required mile for the twice-yearly test of physical fitness. He feigned an asthma problem and begged off. No one questioned him or tried to force the issue. He clearly is in no shape to run – or even to walk – a full mile. He won't be there tomorrow anyway.

“Marisa”

Marisa lives in an apartment. She shares a room with her sister and often complains about not having space to call her own. Their toys and clothes are always getting mixed up. The family computer sits in a corner of the living room and receives almost constant attention when even one family member is at home. Sometimes this machine is a source of frustration. There are negotiations over who will get the most computer time to write a paper or play a favorite game. Occasionally, the printer acts up so no one can get an assignment printed out for class. Dad or Mom will take such things to campus for printing only in a real emergency.

Dad is a student at High Mountain University. Mom is a secretary supporting the family financially until he gets through and she can take her turn at school. Someday they will have a little more space, but right now they are getting by just fine: “making sacrifices today for a better life tomorrow.” In the meantime, the kids are within walking distance of the pool, the playground and school facilities.

Kizer Elementary School

Kizer is known around Brighton for the bright green roof that distinguishes it from all other structures in the town. The road in front of the school has been converted recently to four lanes to accommodate the traffic that passes the school en route to the nearby university. The school is bright and new and beautiful. Primary colors accent the hallways intended to welcome the children who enter each morning. Windows and skylights let in the sun from all directions.

A double-sized gymnasium exists separately from the cafeteria. Expansive playgrounds, athletic fields, and a center courtyard with a well-kept garden are all evidence of a fruitful partnership with the Town of Brighton.

There are parents in and out of Kizer constantly, volunteering in the office, in classrooms, and accompanying classes on field trips. PTA meetings are well attended when they include some performance by the children or a topic of considerable interest regarding curricular issues. Scheduling conflicts are more likely to involve the activities of the children than the work schedules of the parents. Many of the parents are affiliated with High Mountain University. The children of professors go to school with the children of graduate students. Few are wealthy, but most know with certainty that their next meal will await them whenever they are ready for it.

Test scores are consistently high and compete only with the other Brighton Strand Elementary Schools for the highest in the school division. Here many parents tend to be active and vocal and question school practices frequently. “Academic rigor” takes up a lot of air-time at school-community forums and school board meetings attended by Brighton parents who legitimately want to make sure that their children are receiving the best education available. Sometimes teachers in Brighton are more concerned with how to keep these parents *out* of the classroom so that they can go about the business of teaching than about how to get them *in* to support and help.

Partnerships with High Mountain University through the “Adopt a School” program and close associations with the student athletes bring substantial volunteer resources to the school. Students tend to like to volunteer and do their student teaching at the schools that are located close to town where they can spend a couple of hours between classes without driving too far out of their way. The proximity of campus also contributes to easy and interesting field trips. The bike path that runs through campus puts the university within walking distance if necessary and allows classes to attend music programs and plays and to visit various academic departments that support units that the children are studying at school. Even when buses are required, the

commitment of time and money is minimal when they must travel only a couple of miles to reach enriching resources.

As a whole, the Kizer community views its school very positively. In a parent survey administered in the spring of 1997, 80 - 90% of those responding rated Kizer "4" *or above* on a five-point scale in the areas of "School as Community," "Coherent Curriculum," "Climate for Learning," and "Commitment to Character." All of these are priorities in Ernest Boyer's *Basic School* approach to elementary education. Kizer is in the process of incorporating the Basic School model into its program. Teachers have many wonderful things to say about their school and overwhelmingly rate their principal among the best anywhere as an inspirational leader who supports their autonomy as teachers and their growth as professionals.

Kizer, more than any other school in Larson County, has received national recognition for its efforts in inclusive education. Visitors have come from all over the world to witness first hand the way children are included *no matter what* their disability. Families have moved from as far away as New York City specifically to avail themselves of the Kizer version of school for their children. This magnetic appeal has led to an unusually high number of "special needs" students here when compared to other area schools.

Kizer has a breakfast program, but not enough free meal usage to qualify for Title I services. This last school year, there was one half-time reading specialist in the building to serve the needs of all students requiring remedial help in beginning literacy. These indicators paint a picture of a fairly healthy school filled with above average children who exist in above average living situations.

The only documented signal suggesting that something is amiss at Kizer comes in the monthly attendance report from the central office. It troubles Mr. Walton that his school repeatedly ranks low in student attendance when compared to other elementary schools in the district. When he looks closely, he discovers that a small percentage of students represents

chronic absentee problems. Not surprisingly, these same students tend to be those with much lower test scores, more behavior problems, and parents who are rarely seen at school.

All four of the fictitious children described are composite descriptions of *real* children and *real* events involving a number of children attending Kizer Elementary in Brighton, Virginia. Though Mary and Mark are certainly “at-risk” for many of life’s hardships, the school that they attend does not qualify for extra funding to assist in serving its high risk population. At last count, thirty-one percent or roughly one hundred fifty students, qualified for a free or reduced price on school meals. Free and reduced lunch counts provide the guideline used to determine Title I funding from the federal government. One hundred fifty children are not enough to qualify.

Mr. Walton is troubled by a dilemma. He recently determined that it would take only *five* more Kizer students qualifying for free or reduced lunch to provide students in his school with two full-time reading specialists supported through federal Title I funds. He suspects that student-parents who might qualify for such assistance are not submitting applications because they do not view themselves as needing this kind of financial support. Some schools in the area have actively campaigned to enlist applications from qualifying families. He finds himself in an ethical predicament. How do you suggest that people depend upon public assistance when they do not see the need? Are we not in an era of encouragement toward self-sufficiency? At the same time, literally dozens of children could benefit from the added assistance of reading teachers at Kizer.

After spending countless hours at Kizer Elementary during the last two school years, I have become slowly aware of a tangible incongruity in those shiny new walls. Despite many active and engaged families, and many bright and eager learners, both Kizer teachers and parents have described the chasm between the “haves” and “have-nots” at this school. The concern is there, but there are many distractions that have kept the issue from getting much attention until recently. The following illustration demonstrates the pervasiveness and intensity of the problem.

PIs, PPs, TPs, and Bowheads

PI means "Parent Impaired." In a culture where including students with all kinds of disabilities is the norm, teachers have used similar disability lingo to describe other difficult realities. Some children are impaired by their parents. When parents make a nuisance of themselves, are overbearing, or unavailable, their children will suffer. They also may receive this unofficial, yet descriptive, label.

PPs are the "Popular Parents". Those are the parents whose children every teacher would love to have in class. They bake cupcakes and help out and rarely criticize what goes on at school or the decisions of the teachers.

Bowheads "bleed pink blood," have names that end in "i" and parents that are ever-so-worried about *everything* they do. Their problems are solved for them, their activities are planned, and their clothing has never been worn by anybody else.

TPs are the "trailer park kids." It is a sad reality that these children tend to struggle more in school and demonstrate more behavior problems than the "Bowheads." Teacher expectations are affected by prior experience. The fights, the poverty, the hopelessness that leads someone to Forest Mountain and leaves them there places a sadly distinguishable mark on the children at Kizer.

Teachers, like most of us, sometimes use humor to help them cope with the difficulties of life. Sometimes the humor has an edge to it. It is the kind of facetiousness that helps them to describe something sad or difficult in terms that seem more bearable. At Kizer, this irreverent mimicry sometimes appears in the form of underground labels. The caricatures represent a secret code that lets everyone know the issue in question without coming right out and saying it. If you are a part of the team, this secret language of the culture slowly reveals itself. It is like the inside

jokes in every family or close friendship. Often this banter would be hurtful if shared outside the circle that understands its context. It is not politically correct, and there is certain danger that we shortchange the individuality of each child so branded. Nevertheless, the labels do exist and seem to serve some purpose for those who use them.

A recent episode became a poignant example of the disparities that exist within the Kizer school community. Kindergarten teachers were asked to place students for the upcoming school year into class sections on their own as a result of past complaints over uneven distribution of “difficult” children. Each year one or two teachers would feel that, though the goal was heterogeneous grouping, their classes were weighted heavily with the children most difficult to teach. Teachers asked that they be allowed to place the children loosely into two groups for the first week or so of kindergarten. Children would be assigned to a team rather than an individual teacher. Teachers would be allowed some time to assess the needs of the students and later divide them into classes more appropriately.

Principal Robert Walton agreed to allow the teachers to try this new approach provided that: 1) they could find an effective way to communicate with parents about their plans and 2) they would form the classes *themselves* using some defined criteria. In the past Mr. Walton had worked during the summer with the school secretary to form heterogeneous groups of children based on gender, race, and location of the home. It seems that neighborhood affiliation can be an unscientific indicator of socioeconomic status. In kindergarten, *that* is pretty much all you have to go on.

The teachers accomplished their task in a little over two hours one morning early in their summer vacation. The process was quite fascinating to watch. They began by sorting through index cards on which they had written notes about the visits the children had made to kindergarten during the spring. Which ones were a little bit rowdy? Which ones were shy or near tears all day? They placed all of the cards in the middle and went around the table drawing names like a game of “Go Fish.” A couple of them would jump up and cheer each time they

drew a child's name from the pile. They were having some fun anticipating the children that they would soon get to know.

What happened next was sadly revealing. Each teacher counted the number of boys, girls, White Americans, African Americans, and Asians on their lists as well as TPs, Bowheads, PIs, and PPs (known from previous experience with siblings). Too many of *any* of these constituted a reason to move a child to another classroom group. Of course, children would enroll over the summer and changes would need to be made, but the teachers gave themselves a "safety net" by planning to group students loosely until after the first week of school.

There is a kind of melancholy acceptance that shows in the eyes of the teachers as they laugh uncomfortably about things they cannot change and patterns they wish they did not see. The need to separate the TPs from one another acknowledges a weakness in our schools and our society. They practically *dwell* with one another at Forest Mountain. The teachers at Kizer acknowledge the need to expose these children to new people, places, and patterns of behavior.

In the end each teacher had between four and six TPs on her list. Interestingly, the ratio created turned out to accurately describe the Kizer population as this study unfolded. A full twenty percent of Kizer kids are "trailer park kids." If even modest proportions of those children are at-risk for school failure and the trouble that goes with it, Kizer *does* have a problem that needs serious attention.

Sober Realities in a Middle Class School

Mary, Mark, Matthew, and Marisa are all Caucasian American children. They all attend school at Kizer Elementary in Brighton, Virginia. They all get to go on terrific field trips and meet the stars on the football team. They all have access to computers, but Mary and Mark must share *their* computer time with twenty other kids at school. They all watch television and play video games, though the quality and time spent in these activities is distinctly different. Mark

watches whatever he can get. Marisa's mother limits her to an hour a day of *approved* programming.

Mary and Mark have no playground close by. No father figure sits at the dinner table beside them each night. No flat open spaces surround their homes. Few books adorn the shelves inside. Their parents are rarely, if ever, seen at school. Mark's family does not own a car. For Mary, having enough gas to go anywhere extra is a rarity. Mark tried cub scouts for a while when someone could manage to pick him up and take him home. That did not last very long.

**“Sometimes they look at each other as if
they are from different planets.”**

(Amy Fulton, KES guidance counselor)

Generalizations are dangerous and often unfair and inaccurate. But generalizations arise for a reason. Sometimes patterns repeat themselves so often that they become descriptive of some genuine phenomenon. This has happened to the Forest Mountain community. Based on my limited observations of the lives of a few of the children who live there, I can say with a fair degree of certainty that most of them would prefer to live elsewhere. Their families do not have the means to get out. If they did, they would have already gone.

TPs and Bowheads *are* from different planets. Forest Mountain children must walk down to the end of the ill-kept road past the other ramshackle trailer houses to meet the school bus each morning. The road is barely covered with gravel and pitted with ruts where the rain has washed it away. A school bus would risk getting stuck if it should try to climb the hill to get any closer to the homes of the children. While they wait with the dozens of others from the neighborhood, they sometimes interact playfully, but often suffer insults that follow them to school and wind up in the principal's office or in that of the school counselor. The arguments continue on the school bus as they ride past the groomed lawns and into the other world where their school building sits waiting for children to fill it.

When they arrive, they meet and sit beside the Marisas and the Matthews who have computers in their homes and hope in their eyes. Mary and Mark go to school because it is the law, and it is something to do. If they do not go, it is not long before Mrs. Fulton or Mrs. Dreyfus come knocking on their doors to begin persuading, cajoling, and stroking their parents to submit to the system of education that we believe is essential for anything more than mere survival.

Until recently, no one was sounding alarms about Kizer Elementary School's "at-risk" population: no one, that is, except Principal Walton and Counselor Amy Fulton. School Social Worker Karen Dreyfus, who serves all of the thirteen division elementary schools, spends more of her time visiting the homes of Forest Mountain residents than anywhere else in the county. She believes that there is potential for success here. First, however, we must acknowledge that there is a problem.

CHAPTER TWO

Theoretical Foundations

Defining School Community

If we hope to create a community for all children and their families in the school environment, we must first clearly understand the meaning of those words and why we seek such a creation. Webster (1997) defines *community* in the following manner:

1: a unified body of individuals: . . . b: the people with common interests living in a particular area; . . . c: an interacting population of various kinds of individuals...in a common location d: a common characteristic or interest living together within a larger society. . . e: a group linked by a common policy f: a body of persons or nations having a common history or common social, economic, and political interests . . . g: a body of persons of common and especially professional interests scattered through a larger society 2: society at large 3 a: joint ownership or participation b : common character : LIKENESS c: social activity: FELLOWSHIP d: a social state or condition.

School community is that *fellowship* of human beings where the *common interest* that they share is an interest in learning. The likeness that is sought is not a likeness that thwarts diversity, but one that celebrates the journey toward a knowledge and an understanding of the way that the world works so that all who partake of this community might be capable of fully participating in what it has to offer. The population in a community *interacts* and *participates* toward some *common goal*. In a school community that goal is education. This vision of a community of learners may be a reality for many who enter the halls of Kizer Elementary School, both children and adults. When we look closely, however, we must acknowledge that there is one group that qualifies for participation that is noticeably absent. Perhaps it is their right to reject

what the learning community has to offer. Perhaps the community has inadvertently omitted them. With evidence mounting that family involvement is crucial to the learning that schools seek to facilitate (Henderson and Berla, eds., 1994), it is our responsibility to create an environment that welcomes, celebrates, and encourages the participation of all who rightfully belong. Yet good intentions do not create communities for learning. Human interactions are perplexing encounters that even scholars struggle to unravel and to predict.

An Ecological Framework

Social theorist Urie Bronfenbrenner has contributed a lifetime of study to the inextricable links between the development of the human organism and its environment. This ecological theory posits that human beings develop within the specific contexts of the social, familial, and cultural environments that surround their lives. To attempt a study of human behavior and development apart from these contexts misses essential ingredients necessary for understanding and progress (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, 1986, 1988). It may be that the key to creating and maintaining a school community rich in stakeholder participation lies in some understanding of the ecological framework in which such a community is born.

The ecological perspective championed by Bronfenbrenner has significantly influenced the fields of child development, psychology, and education. Many twentieth century researchers, therapists, and educators rely upon his theory of the interdependence of family, school, community, and culture both to understand the human condition and to suggest appropriate strategies for solving problems within it. Central to an ecological perspective are the contexts in which learning, growth, and relationships occur (Vickers and Minke, 1995).

Systems Theory

Specific contexts within the ecological domain have been termed “systems” by some theorists because of the dynamic nature of the associations among them. Systems theory fits easily *within* ecological theory to address the complexity of human experience in the distinct worlds of politics, business and industry, community organization, child development, and family and marital relations. The intricacy of the lives of human beings escapes easy definition and encourages those seeking understanding to grapple with mechanisms for developing conceptual models that increase insight and provide accessible solutions to the problems inherent to human existence. Systems theory is one such model.

The term “ecology” appears often in systems literature linking the concept of human systems with the biological term descriptive of the relationships between living organisms and their environments. In fact, the concepts are melded into the term “eco-systemic” by some authors in order to capture the essence of both the ecological framework and systems theory in the same breath (Vickers and Minke, 1995). An ecosystem is “the ecological community of all the organisms in a given area together with their physical and chemical environment, considered as a unit of function and activity” (Hayakawa, et.al., 1981, p. 246). Human units of function and activity are of particular interest to educators and social theorists.

Connard and Novick (1996) synthesize the works of a number of family systems theorists to define specific “guiding principles” that appear relevant to general systems theory across disciplines:

- Interdependence.* One part of the system cannot be understood in isolation from the other parts....
- Subsystems.* All systems are made up of subsystems....
- Circularity.* Every member of a system influences every other member in a circular chain reaction.
- Equifinality.* The same event leads to different outcomes and a

given outcome may result from different events...

Communication. All behavior is viewed as interpersonal messages that contain both factual and relationship information.

Rules. Rules operate as norms within a (system) and serve to organize (system) interactions.

Homeostasis. A steady, stable state is maintained in the ongoing interaction system through the use of ...norms and a mutually reinforcing feedback loop.

Morphogenesis...(Systems)also require flexibility to adapt to internal and external change (p. 3).

By considering the characteristics of a system as a whole, it is theorized that individual parts of the system can be better understood and influenced, but never in isolation from the system to which they belong. Applying a systems perspective to the business community, more productivity might be attained. Applying such a perspective to community organizations, more collaboration might be accomplished. Applied to children and families, a systems cognition could theoretically lead to happier homes and more productive lives. Ecological theory suggests that the acknowledgment of the complex interconnected variables in life provides the key to both the problems and solutions inherent to human circumstance.

Family Systems Theory

Family systems theory interprets family life in terms of an ecological pattern where the many thoughts, feelings, and actions of the members directly and indirectly influence the thoughts, feelings, and actions of others in the environment, sometimes in very predictable ways. Although some have criticized the “systems” view of family life as potentially dehumanizing and unnecessarily restrictive (Murphy & Callaghan, 1988; Hinde, 1989), many researchers have come to accept family systems theory as a most realistic and helpful model for understanding family interactions and affecting change. A family-centered approach to service delivery adopts

a philosophy “in which families are recognized as having unique concerns, strengths and values” (Connard & Novick, 1996, p. 1). and “represents a paradigm shift away from deficit-based, medical models that discover, diagnose and treat ‘problems’ in families to an ecological model” (p.1). Central ideas in a family ecology model include “...creating partnerships and helping relationships... building the community environment... (and) linking families and community support” (p. 2). The environment in which development occurs has a tremendous influence over the nature of human outcomes. These influential environments include the family, social networks, formal community support systems, and society as a whole (Connard & Novick, 1996).

Systems Theory Applied to Schools

Researchers in education adopt some of the same language utilized by family systems theorists to describe the environmentally influenced relationships intrinsic also to the school setting. A systems approach applied to interactions between the systems of family and school appears to be gaining momentum as more and more indicators point to the essential nature of partnerships in creating healthy learning communities for children.

Vickers and Minke (1995) explore the characteristics of relationships addressed in family systems theory that appear significantly in *school building systems* and the interplay between family members and school personnel. They identify family systems constructs and use them to develop an instrument to evaluate the quality of these parent-teacher relationships. The relevant constructs include *affiliation and support, dependability and availability, and shared expectations and beliefs*. All of these concepts group under a broader descriptive element that the researchers call *joining*. *Communication* constitutes a second descriptor used to encompass both *communication to other* and *communication from other*; both are obviously important in teacher-parent relationships.

Francie Smith (1990) paints an alarming picture of some of the more disturbing parallels between family and school in a paper entitled “From Dysfunctional Families to Dysfunctional Schools” presented at the Annual Meeting of the National Dropout Prevention Conference on March 27, 1990. Table 2-1 recreates Smith’s descriptive matrix that captures the system orientation of both schools and families and how the dysfunction of either interacts with and influences the other.

Table 2-1

Smith’s Matrix of Dysfunctional Interactions between Home and School

	DYSFUNCTIONAL SCHOOLS	FUNCTIONAL SCHOOLS
DYSFUNCTIONAL STUDENTS	AUTHORITARIAN <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • REACTIVE • INACTIVE • CHRONIC ANXIETY • CHAOTIC 	OPTIMIZING <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • DEVELOPMENTAL • REFORMATIVE • ENABLING • PROACTIVE
FUNCTIONAL STUDENTS	REGRESSIVE <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • REPRESSIVE • INHIBITIVE • ACUTE ANXIETY • DEPRESSIVE 	EMPOWERING <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • PARTICIPATIVE • INTEGRATIVE • INTERACTIVE • COOPERATIVE

(Smith, 1990, p. 12)

By “replicating the dysfunctional patterns learned in the family, we create dysfunctional systems” (Smith, 1990, p. 13). Smith delineates a number of important implications for schools as systems that wish to ascertain *fully functional* interactions with family systems. Schools “must both change themselves and provide opportunities for change” (p. 13). In order to do this, “they (faculty and staff) need to become aware of the relationship processes they bring with themselves

to school...(and) be willing to change those that do not work for them” (p. 13). Possibly most important, “this change must occur in an atmosphere of acceptance of self and others” (Smith, 1990, p.13).

A Critical Framework

Even where self-acceptance and inclusion for all are celebrated, change can often be elusive. When we attempt to look at troublesome situations that appear daily in schools with an eye toward resolution, we may be frustrated by the magnitude of the task. How can we, in the course of a busy school day, afford the extra energy required for deep reflection upon systemic issues that whole societies have failed to address constructively? Nonetheless, teachers and mainstream parents at Kizer have expressed enough discomfort with the status quo that small reflective steps toward action are beginning to take place. The systems that support dysfunction may be understood from an ecological perspective, but the crucial actions to alleviate dysfunction, I believe, are more clearly revealed through a lens of critical theory. A critical framework provides a mechanism for looking discriminately at our *relationship functions* in order to affect needed change.

Critical theory offers one perspective for dealing with harsh societal realities. With no pretense toward explanation of the sophisticated philosophical roots of critical theory, an elementary understanding of this ideology has helped to inform and influence the construction of knowledge gained from this study from the outset. Early in my doctoral coursework, I was fortunate to work with two classmates on a simple visual model that has assisted me repeatedly in grasping the most essential concepts that underlie a modest understanding of critical theory as it applies to research practice.

After reading Kincheloe and McLaren’s (1995) description of critical research and consulting with my colleagues, I constructed the diagram in Figure 2-1 to conceptualize the authors’ interpretation of critical theory. The magnifying glass is intended to depict the lens that the researcher supplies for looking closely at a complex situation which is represented in the

diagram by the entangled knot of fishing line. With an augmented view of the problem, the fisherman is better able to extricate the mess for himself and move on to capture the ultimate prize of justice and liberty. The fisherman represents whatever person or group of people find themselves in perplexing circumstances amidst the enigmatic systems that influence their lives. A critical research perspective embodies an ethic that requires close examination and reflection upon sometimes bewildering circumstances so that those involved may take action to improve those circumstances.

Critical theory fits well with action research methodology when the inquiry reflects goals of *emancipation* and *freedom* for those involved in its practice. This is not always the case with action research. It is understood that the action research process infers recurring cycles of *planning, action, observation, and reflection* (Calhoun, 1994, Matthews, 1995) which mirror critical theory's emphasis upon continuous reflective action. Action research, however, may be undertaken with or without the express purpose of freeing participants from any *oppression* per se. Critical theory assumes the existence of some form of social injustice. Critical action research suggests a method for addressing such injustice. This particular framework, therefore, requires a distinct orientation toward liberation (Carr and Kemmis, 1986).

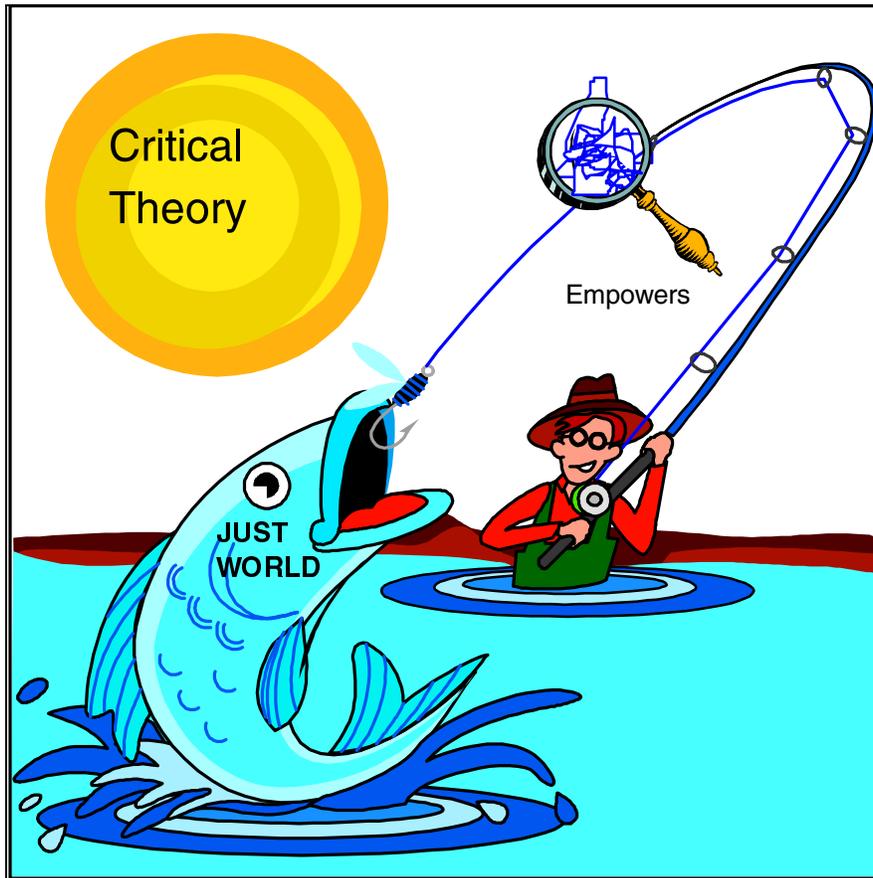


Figure 2-1 Conceptualization of Critical Theory

“Critical research can best be understood in the context of empowerment of individuals. Inquiry that aspires to be *critical* must be connected to an attempt to confront the injustice of a particular society or sphere within a society.”

“. . .critical researchers understand that individual identity and human agency form such a chaotic knot of intertwined articulations that no social theorist can ever completely disentangle them” (Kincheloe and McLaren, 1995).

Liberation and emancipation may seem like strong or excessively dramatic concepts to associate with issues of parent involvement. I would argue that, for some individual families, conditions have deteriorated to the point that the systems within which a child functions have little or no regard for one another. Sudia Paloma McCaleb (1994) uses just this argument when grounding her work on building communities for learning in the critical pedagogy of Paulo Freire. When education is at stake, lack of regard begets the oppression that comes with illiteracy. For me, this situation supports a need for liberation from dysfunction if we are ever to succeed in educating the children who teeter between disassociated school and family systems.

Key concepts within the particular critical theory espoused by philosopher Jurgen Habermus (Braaton, 1991, Young, 1990) include *communicative action* and the *ideal speech situation*. A *speech community* is established when relationships support authentic communication within the community even when sensitive issues arise. Communicative action may take place only when there is an ideal speech situation whereby communication is genuine and action is taken based on earnest self-reflection. In reality, there is little time in the lives of many teachers to reflect deeply beyond their own classroom practice. Parents' busy and stressful work-lives often make the notion of reflection toward change nearly an absurdity. Research literature included throughout this document will demonstrate, however, that when there are efforts to do so within the school community, individual classroom communities and *children* benefit profoundly. Logically, *learning* communities require *speech* communities, the same speech communities that are created only through ongoing reflective action and conversation.

Defining Risk Critically and Ecologically

Critical and ecological theories provide two perspectives for reflecting upon issues of risk for children. We might consider ecological-systems theory the most meaningful way to define the problem situation, while critical theory provides one possible approach to suggesting solutions.

The potential for a child's success or failure in school may be framed in ecological terms that encompass the system of the school and the system of the family within a broader community system. When defining risk factors that contribute to our concern that a child may drop out of school and significantly lower the chances of success in life, lists of indicators have been published to alert families and educators and call them to action. Traditionally, these lists include characteristics that exist both outside the child and within the child's person. External factors typically include family characteristics such as socioeconomic background, ethnic group, divorce, and single parent families. Internal indicators almost always include low self-esteem and low motivation along with learning deficiencies, lack of school readiness, and limited English proficiency (Garard, 1995).

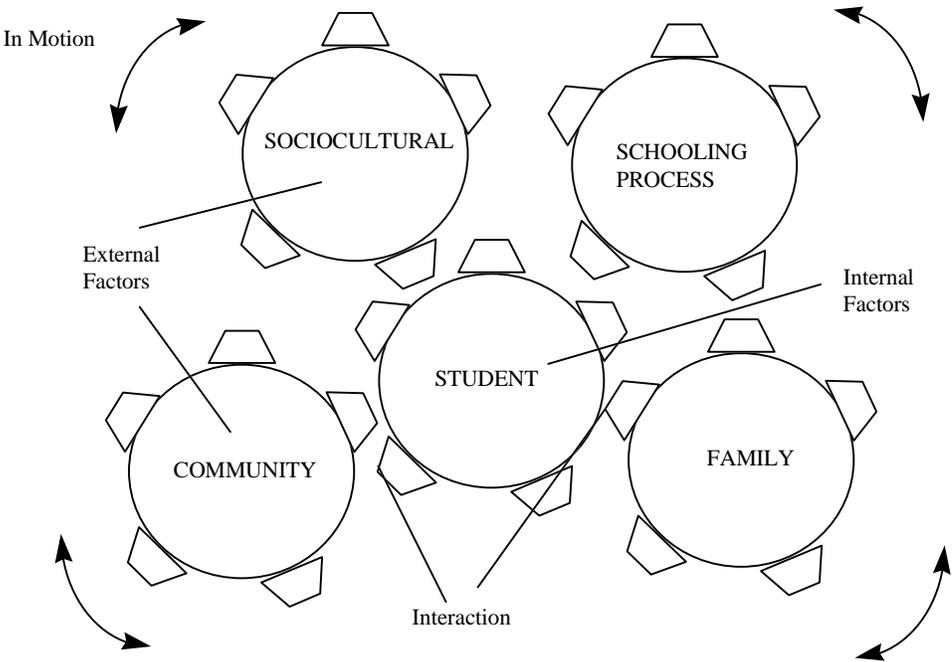
Garard takes exception to these traditional indicators of "at-riskness." He fears that such definitions let "the onus of at-riskness rest. . . entirely within the student (and the family). That is, characteristics of the student, whatever s/he brings into the schooling environment, determine at-riskness. These definitions do not consider what already exists in the environment" (p. 3). He goes on to specify an ecological perspective for describing the risks encountered by children. When we include the student's voice and consider "the impact of the student's environment" (p.4), we are both kinder and more accurate in our categorizations. By removing the stigmatization and negative labeling that follow traditional methods of identification, Garard believes we better serve the needs of children and focus on our own dysfunctions where changes can be made.

The echo of others within the community of ecological theory can be heard in Garard's consideration of "goodness of fit" (Connard and Novick, 1996) between the individual and the environment. Garard defines a student at-risk as "someone who is not experiencing positive interactions with his/her environment due to a poor fit between internal characteristics and environmental demands" (p. 6). A conceptual model attempts to capture the dynamic nature of environmental factors as they interact with the child. In Garard's model (see Figure 2-2), gears in motion surround a student. The system presumably becomes "stuck" and renders the student inoperable if the "cogs" between the student and other circumstantial components do not fit together well and operate smoothly. Thus begins the risk to that child's future.

A critical perspective supports Garard's philosophy with an emphasis on empowerment through understanding. If children, families, and teachers look critically at the situations in which they find themselves, they *together* may suggest solutions that are attempted, observed, assessed, and adjusted appropriately. The cycle of critical action is neverending in the life of a school where multiple systems interact and will inevitably clash.

Critical analysis would include the student and family at-risk in the search for resolution through a speech community that respects the absolute necessity for building its own capacity for ongoing communicative action. Liberation and emancipation are needed because there are oppressed individuals whose children are not being adequately served by schools. Oppression implies hardship imposed by society. Schools may impose oppressive burdens on families through our overpowering assumptions and expectations in an environment that is blatantly, if unintentionally, uncommunicative with its at-risk population. An ideal speech situation assures that we listen as much as we talk and that we learn as much as we teach. We share responsibility for this with the families themselves, but oppression and injustice require leadership for recovery. That leadership must come from the school.

At-Riskness Conceptualized



- Basic Assumptions:
- 1. Everything is in motion.
 - 2. The speed of motion will change depending on degrees of intensity.
 - 3. Changes of intensity will result in changing interactions.
 - 4. Changing interactions may result in being at-risk.

(Garard, 1995)

Figure 2-2 At-Riskness Conceptualized

Critical-Ecological Perspectives on Building School Community

Creating a place where children and families **can** fit in despite the risk that plagues them is the only humane response. A number of reformers in the education, health, and social service communities have developed programs that address issues of *fit* and *risk* systemically. Agreeing that students exist within a milieu of overlapping influences, some educators and social scientists are developing emergent models that consider the fit between the personal characteristics of students and their multilevel environments.

Comprehensive service models could be considered those that take this systemic approach to children's services. Such models attempt to address the many needs of children within their unique environments by utilizing a multifaceted intervention plan (Baizerman and Compton, 1993; Carter, 1994). Comprehensive service models (CSMs) for children are those that engage the efforts of several human service agencies to meet the developmental needs of children in the community. These usually include schools, health service providers and social service agencies (Jeffers & Olebe, 1994) in programs like Joy Dryfoos's Full Service Schools approach (Dryfoos, 1994; Dryfoos, 1995). James Comer and Edward Zigler's CoZi model (O'Neil, 1997; Stern, 1995) marries Comer's School Development Program (Comer, 1986; Comer, 1988) with ideas from Zigler's School of the 21st Century (Tregenza, 1993) to create another model for meeting the needs of children. Publications like *Together We Can: A Guide for Crafting a Profamily System of Education and Human Services* published by the U. S. Department of Health and Human Services (Melaville and Blank, 1993); *Let's Do It Our Way: Working Together for Educational Excellence: A Handbook for Community-School Collaboration for the Educational Betterment of All Our Children* (Smith, Lincoln, & Dodson, 1991); and *Putting the Pieces Together: Comprehensive School-linked Strategies for Children and Families* provided by the U. S. Department of Education (Riley, Robinson, Tirozzi, Bither & Jehl, 1996) describe procedures for engaging a community in forming interagency partnerships and becoming more responsive to the needs of a local community. Each of these documents

makes a strong case for collaborative strategies and outlines specific steps for initiating such efforts including needs assessments, development of funding resources, implementation, and evaluation. Initiatives may be championed by individual schools as at Bowling Park Elementary in Norfolk, Virginia or whole districts as in Sacramento, California. Some states like Delaware and Texas have begun to initiate collaborations statewide (Personal notes from ASCD Institute Dec. 8-10, 1997).

Ernest Boyer acknowledges the value of Comprehensive Service Models in his book, *The Basic School: A Community for Learning*, while expressing concern that schools must not divert attention from their primary educational purpose. Boyer promotes a moderate approach that provides for basic health care, counseling, and necessary child care with an emphasis on prevention and an orientation to service for the whole child. At the same time, he emphasizes the role of the school as a referral source that can connect children and their families with needed community support for crises without taking on those responsibilities that are clearly beyond the expertise of educators. Yet, within his moderation, Boyer insists that “Children can become a community priority.” (p. 170) In this statement, Boyer incidentally supports the spirit behind the notion of liberation for children and the rationale that it will be *communities* that provide the resources needed to get there. His advocacy of active parent involvement and leadership does the same for parents. The participative nature of his approach to school reform seems to suggest a critical perspective on change within schools. If we look deeply together and empower one another to make necessary changes, we will step toward solutions that create success in school for children.

CHAPTER THREE

The Inquiry Process

The Basic School: A Community for Learning by Ernest Boyer (1995) brings together much of the wisdom of research and practical experience of educators across the country to make a strong statement regarding the contents of an ideal elementary education. Boyer promotes an explicitly designed, yet highly flexible, program for elementary schools that hits the highlights of other well-known school reform initiatives. His straightforward language speaks to the ordinary teacher while his strong links to research and theory persuade the university community as well. Central to the Basic School philosophy is a focus on four major priorities: 1) *The School as Community*, 2) *A Coherent Curriculum*, 3) *A Climate for Learning*, and 4) *A Commitment to Character*.

One school that has recently begun to engage in an initiative to transform itself into a “Basic School” is Kizer Elementary in Brighton, Virginia. With the leadership of Principal Robert Walton, Kizer teachers spent 1997 becoming familiar with the Basic School philosophy. Inservice training sessions, reading and discussion groups, and a school-wide faculty retreat began the initiative focused on understanding the priorities of the Basic School and the steps that can be taken to embrace and practice those priorities in a manner most suitable for Kizer.

As an administrative intern working with Mr. Walton, I was fortunate to be a part of this process. At the end of the 1996-1997 school year, teachers were arranged into *family groups* designed to serve two functions for the school. First, each family contained one teacher from every grade level along with several specialty teachers intended to work together to plan multi-age activities for students within that family. It was hoped that this arrangement would encourage a community climate and a sense of belonging beyond individual classroom groupings and grade-level teams. Second, each family had responsibility for attending to one of the four

Basic School priorities on behalf of the entire school. It was their role to serve as leaders and planners in addressing the priority to which they had been assigned. For example, it was the job of the *Commitment to Character Family* to think diligently about ways to address issues such as honesty, integrity, and responsibility. For this first year, each of the four families was to plan at least one school-wide activity that would apply, and draw attention, specifically to their priority.

In my role as administrative intern, I temporarily became a part of one of these families at Kizer. The *School as Community Family* was a natural place for me to reside because of my sustained interest in school-community relations and parent partnerships. On the first day that this group met together, we began to concentrate on three issues that fit well within Boyer's description of the *school as community priority*. This group made plans to address business partnerships, family connections, and school celebrations that could promote a community identity between the school and all of its partners. In addition, a new designated teacher duty was attached to the list of extra teacher responsibilities this year. Three of the teachers on this team willingly volunteered to act as "parent involvement coordinators" with the support of the rest of the *school as community family*. The team identified one particular neighborhood that concerns them deeply. This study evolved directly from the process of this *family-team* as it began to reach out to that specific group of families that have been identified as "at risk" by many of the educators who serve them.

The meeting on that first day, June 13, 1997, turned out to be a significant turning point for me personally. I sat with this group of teachers and began to tremble with excitement as they explored aloud many of the same themes for community and family involvement about which I had been studying for the previous two years. As a doctoral student seeking a place of engagement for a dissertation research project, I realized that I had worked my way into a rich and rewarding environment for inquiry. So on Friday, the 13th of June, I donned the hat of researcher as well as principal-intern and became an active participant observer in the process of the Community Family as they began to address their ambitious goals. The study did not become official until later that summer as I worked my way over the required hurdles with the university.

As you will see in the pages that follow, some parts of this important day had to be reconstructed for inclusion in this case study. Nevertheless, this day is when it all began.

Statement of the Problem

Parental support has been documented as one important indicator of school success for children (Henderson and Berla, 1994). Parents of lower socioeconomic status are typically less likely than middle class parents to participate directly in the schooling of their children (Davies, 1988). Lack of involvement contributes to the risk factors that can inhibit children's learning and progress. This is true at Kizer Elementary where a university community often clamoring for greater academic rigor meets a less fortunate population whose chief concerns lean more toward meeting basic daily needs. It seems that these two populations have little in common to bring them together. Yet, it is the responsibility of the school to serve the needs of *all* of its students. This necessarily means working diligently to involve *all* parents.

Purpose of the Study

Boyer's Basic School aligns with a nationwide reform movement that encourages parent involvement in education. The purpose of this study was to understand and to document the process undertaken by one group of teachers as they began to address Boyer's "school as community" priority by reaching out to the parent population that seemed most isolated from their school community.

Research Questions

Primary questions:

What happens when one school begins to address the needs of its at-risk population by intentionally reaching out to involve the parents of these students in the life of the school? How is this accomplished within the context of a school beginning to address the priorities of a “Basic School?”

Original Secondary questions:

- What were the existing barriers that prevented healthy family-school connections in the past? How were these barriers addressed at one school?
- What were the perceptions of teachers regarding the population that they were attempting to reach? Did these perceptions change as teachers actively attempted to involve these parents and, if so, how?
- What were the thoughts, feelings, and actions of teachers as they engaged in this process?

As the naturalistic study unfolded, I found it necessary to change the focus away from the particular perceptions of teachers and onto the structures that were established to accomplish project goals that developed in the course of the inquiry. For this reason, my questions also began to change. Barriers to past success and teacher perceptions are addressed peripherally, but the foundation for the case study seemed to rest most naturally within the organization of evolving case components rather than the perceptions of individuals members.

Subsequent Secondary questions:

- What structures were created to facilitate the process and guide its progress?
- How did these structures develop over time to support the growth of the school community at Kizer?

Research Design

This qualitative study involved a naturalistic, case study approach to understanding the work of one group of educators as they began to reach out to parents who are traditionally uninvolved in the school. The study closely aligned with the characteristics of critical action research as teachers attempted to understand and address a particular issue that they collectively acknowledged. Though the study was participatory in nature, I opted to omit any attempt to instruct the group in the action research process itself. I did not wish to promote a particular research agenda, but to follow the process undertaken by a school wishing to address an issue most naturally. Because I would be a short-term member of the group, it seemed more appropriate that I offer myself as a servant of the group who might have resources that could be helpful to them because of a prolonged interest in the area of parent involvement and comprehensive service models. I believed that to attempt to steer the group into an action research process could have been damaging to precious field relations and could ultimately weary teachers of the extraordinary efforts that they had willingly taken upon themselves. As my role in the effort changed to one of more active participation, the action research cycle of planning, acting, observing, and reflecting guided my personal inquiry process. Our group orientation toward change that would free the communication between teachers and parents in the Forest Mountain community led to my presumption in categorizing the process as one of *critical action research*. The study required that we involve teachers and parents in close inspection of the injustice for children that occurs when some parents are omitted from the school community. Once we were able to see the situation more clearly, it was hoped that we would be more qualified to create the support system in the school that children require to learn.

Sample

The original target group of teachers for this study was assigned to the “school family” charged with addressing *school as community* issues at Kizer Elementary as part of a Basic School initiative begun in June of 1997. The group included one teacher from each grade level, kindergarten through grade five, along with one special education consulting teacher, one art teacher, one reading specialist, and myself as an administrative intern working with the school’s principal.

Family groups were assigned by the principal through a process of sorting an alphabetical list of teachers one at a time into each of four priority groups (one to *school as community*, one to *curriculum with coherence*, one to *climate for learning*, one to *commitment to character*, etc.) until all teachers were included. A few changes were made at the discretion of the principal to assign individuals where they fit most logically within their job descriptions. For example, the guidance counselor was moved to the *commitment to character family* that would address many of the objectives supported daily by the guidance program. It was foreseeable from the outset that individuals apart from the *School as Community Family (SaC)* might be included in the process at their own discretion because of some special interest in connecting with the designated parent population. In this way, the membership in the research group was predicted to be somewhat fluid though it was believed that, for the most part, the process of the *SaC* group members alone would be considered (see Appendix A). As it turned out the efforts of this group planted the seeds for a project that involved the efforts of several other groups that will be described in detail in the case description. Additional groups that became a part of this study included a grant advisory group; a team of school and community members interested in comprehensive approaches to addressing at-risk issues; the PTA Executive Board at the school; a parent advisory committee; and a group of graduate students from the Teaching and Learning Department at High Mountain University. All of these groups evolved naturally in the course of this study. Each continues to influence the developing goals, activities and outcomes of the

efforts initiated by the School as Community Family to create community for the children and families at Kizer.

Methods of Data Collection

The actions of these six groups have been followed from their initiation during the summer or fall of 1997 through January of 1998 in order to capture a thorough understanding of how one school begins an endeavor to involve families at-risk in the schooling of their children. From the outset, I served as an overt participant observer within the School as Community Family. The teachers, students, and community members that became involved in the project were informed fully of my intentions as a researcher and contributor to their individual groups. I continued my internship with Kizer Elementary School through the fall of 1997 and worked with this project and studied it simultaneously. Eventually, as you will see, the study and work of these groups led me into another role as the school's home-school coordinator, a position that grew out of the process to involve the parents of students at-risk.

In the beginning, the School as Community Family identified three issues on which they intended to focus their efforts: 1) business partnerships, 2) community-building within the school, and 3) reaching out to uninvolved parents. It was the latter issue on which I concentrated my attention as a researcher while attending to the other two only in relation to the third. For example, consideration was given to involving business partners in the effort to reach uninvolved parents. In addition, the celebration planned by this group for the first day of school involved everyone in the school. Special efforts, such as delivering flyers door to door, were considered as initial attempts to involve the target population. The overlap of the first two priorities into the third brought them into an arena relevant to my study.

My interest in this field put me in an ideal situation to serve as a resource person who had the time and inclination to do some of the “leg work” needed to get such a project off the ground. At the same time, since my involvement would be for only a short time, it seemed important that the leadership for this project grow from the core of the group itself. The group’s membership included a number of highly dedicated, energetic, and creative teachers who had the stamina and conviction to see their plans enacted. As my role in the project changed to one of leadership and school employee, these teachers were instrumental in keeping us mindful that the ultimate responsibility for the project must be dispersed so that it will have greater potential for becoming a part of the system long after I am gone. As you will see, however, that balance has proven to be difficult to maintain since teachers and guidance counselors already have burgeoning caseloads and responsibilities.

The primary sources of data were transcripts of School as Community (SaC) Family meetings, monthly Family Representative meetings with the principal, At-risk Grant Advisory (ARGA) meetings, and Kizer Comprehensive Community Team (KCCT) meetings. Additional transcripts were made of the recorded journal entries that I found to be a crucial method of data collection. Most field notes were also taken in the form of audio taped recordings. After a period of time when I attempted to write after every meeting of essential groups and every significant event, I found that I was much more likely to capture important images, along with my own interpretations of events, if I recorded them during my daily walks or car rides. This strategy allowed me to keep a much more extensive record and make use of the time when neither computer nor pencil and paper were feasible. I transcribed these tapes, and those from significant meetings, and found that the process of listening again to my own thoughts and the words of others yielded a valuable opportunity for initial analysis of the data. As I typed, using headphones and a foot pedal Dictaphone, I recorded new thoughts and questions about the data in italicized print within the body of the transcript itself.

In addition, four interviews were conducted with original members of the School as Community Family during a panic phase when I realized that I had no written record of the rich

process undertaken by that group on June 13. All SaC Family members were invited to participate in these informal interviews (see Appendix B). I interviewed only the four that expressed their interest in written form. These interviews produced important teacher perspectives on the beginning efforts of the SaC Family as well as other information about the progress of the Basic School initiative at Kizer. Eventually, the notes from that first meeting turned up, but not until after these interviews had taken place. Since these conversations have proven to hold important information from the perspectives of individuals in the process, it was fortunate that the June 13 notes were missing for such a long while. If this had not been the case, the interviews would not have arisen as a necessity.

When I introduced my research plans to the group, I asked for permission to audio tape all meetings during the designated time period and to collect field notes on all related activities. I felt that it was extremely important that I acknowledge and respect the tremendous amount of change that was already being asked of these teachers as they participated in the effort toward becoming a Basic School. I was committed to a principle of adding little to their burden while I learned from their process. With this perspective in mind, I only pursued these valuable interviews when in a position of extreme need. After the interviews, a process of “member checking” (Maykut and Morehouse, 1994) was used to ascertain that I had been successful in building an understanding from the perspective of the participating teachers alongside my own. Each interviewee was given an opportunity to read and comment on their individual transcripts. In addition, SaC Family members were offered an opportunity to review meeting transcripts containing my initial interpretations and marginal notes. To date, no one has accepted this offer.

Pseudonyms are used throughout this entire document to protect the privacy of individual teachers and, of course, any parents or children that come up in their conversations. Though, originally, I could think of no strong argument for omitting the name of the elementary school where this study took place, I have opted to use a pseudonym for the name of the school, the university and the town to make certain that the anonymity of all individuals except myself as researcher will be respected. A need for utmost confidentiality has developed as the study has

taken me to issues of sensitivity that could damage the efforts of the project if handled indelicately.

It is my belief that the broad scope of the transcript data including interviews, meetings, recorded journal, and field notes along with related documents has yielded sufficient rich information on which to base this study. All sections of audio recordings that appeared to link directly or indirectly to the outreach process were transcribed in their totality. The apparent thoughts, feelings and actions of the individual participants along with the progress and stumbling blocks of the group as a whole were noted throughout the course of the study leading to the systematic analysis process that follows.

Data Analysis

As stated earlier, a preliminary analysis was attempted during the data collection process. My intention had been to transcribe each tape before the next recording. In reality, this practice did not materialize. I found the transcription process to be slow and laborious however fruitful. So much was happening daily in the field that it was essential that I record observations as they occurred so that my records could be as accurate and descriptive as possible. For this reason, most of the tapes, especially those recorded after the middle of September, were transcribed and analyzed after the bulk of data collection was complete. In the sense that I was invariably in a process of oral interpretation and analysis into what I came to call my “walking journal,” analysis was virtually constant and ongoing. Most of my printed analysis, however, occurred during the months of December 1997 and January 1998.

Once transcripts were produced of the twenty-three microcassette tapes collected throughout this process, I developed a procedure that seemed to best suit my purposes for creating a thorough understanding of the data. It was at this point that I went back to my growing collection of texts on qualitative research methodology for guidance (Hitchcock and Hughes, 1995; Stake, 1995; Yin, 1994). The process that I actually followed in examining the data is my

own rendition of analysis born out of the process that emerged as I began to look deeply at the data against a background of advice about beginning interpretation. I started with the “constant comparative method” as described by Maykut and Morehouse (1994) while considering Miles and Huberman’s (1994) strategy of creating “intellectual bins” all throughout the process. From there my methods grew in what seemed to be a logical and almost instinctive process for constructing meaning from the data.

During the transcription phase, preliminary coding included distinctions between settings and activities (Family Meetings, Family Representative Meetings, interviews, journal thoughts, etc.) along with organizational information including dates, times, page numbers, and line numbers. Care was taken to attribute words and statements that were keys to the perceptions of individuals to the correct person as I attempted to track the process of whole groups while simultaneously noting contributions and concerns of individuals. Though transcripts were made verbatim in as much as possible, I later took the liberty of omitting the natural interruptions to the flow of the written language that often occur in oral speech. Words like *you know*, *um*, and *like* were discarded. Reading clarity was enhanced further by substituting intended words such as *because* and *them* for partial utterances such as *‘cause* and *‘em*.

Three copies were made of the entire body of transcripts that contained only the preliminary codes. One set of transcripts was ordered chronologically and kept as the original series for my records. A second set of transcript data was sorted into subsets representing the six groups that have been influential in the growth of the project. Relevant documents were added to transcripts in these sets of data and all items were ordered chronologically within the collection to which they belong. A third package of transcripts was used for the physical acts of cutting and pasting in order to sort and analyze. It is this third collection of raw data that became the working pages from which a thorough understanding of the process has grown.

Analysis procedures were determined by the meaning apparent within individual data units and their relationships with one another. As expected, important themes emerged as the

process unfolded, but I began by looking deliberately to the words and actions of the participants for insight into these themes that were determined early in the study proposal process:

- common understandings about the neighborhood/families of focus
- perceptions of teachers
- perceived barriers to participation of teachers
- teachers' perceptions of parental barriers to participation
- plans for action (individual and collective)
- teachers' belief systems
- teachers' thoughts
- teachers' feelings
- teachers' actions carried out (individual and collective)
- changes of perceptions through the process
- consistency of perceptions
- role of the principal
- perceived outcomes

With these issues in mind, I began by unitizing the data as described in Maykut and Morehouse (1994) and Lincoln and Guba (1985). These authors suggest reading through transcripts giving them initial codes indicating their location in the data and marking off “chunks of meaning” with a phrase or word that is briefly descriptive of the substance found within that unit. This was a useful first step and I quickly found a need to add and substitute categories not found in my original list. After this second run through the data, a predominantly new set of categories was developed and marked on the pages as deemed most appropriate at the time (see Appendix C).

Next, I began cutting apart the unitized bits of data and sorting them into those new categories. Maykut and Morehouse (1994) suggest attaching each data unit onto a five by eight inch index card so that they may be posted on newsprint for easy movement among classifications. I had this strategy in mind at this stage of the process. I bought a large roll of poster paper and attached it to the wall of my office with pushpins and began gluing data units onto index cards as I went through them for a third time. Somewhere during this third pass through the data, I realized that this strategy could not work for me with the large amount of data available. It would take a gymnasium to house the number of cards that I would have in front of

me if I continued in this manner. Instead, I skipped the index card phase and went on to re-sort units into large pocket-type file folders so that even the smallest bits of paper could not escape. A fourth pass through the data produced sub-categories within each grouping (see Appendix D).

This sub-categorization was accomplished by stacking and clipping bits of data together within these groups. The next step was to spread out all of these *data packets* within their categories so that logical connections might be made. It was apparent that there were themes that recurred across categories and those that were related closely to others. The act of physically arranging and recombining these data packets took the space on my family room floor along with every table, chair, and bookshelf in the room. Data packets went from this scattered arrangement into small folders that fit inside two file boxes made for the five by eight inch index cards that were discarded early in the process.

Data packets were arranged in a series that seemed to fit logically with my growing understanding of how the project developed over time. At this point the data was reviewed once again with an eye toward some specific themes that were beginning to take shape. Colored stickers and highlighter pens were used during this phase of the process as I attempted to give myself some visual cues to the most important components of the developing case study. Data were ordered chronologically within each packet so that they might be reviewed sequentially within units of meaning as I wrote. Some further analysis and reordering were inevitable as I attempted to tell the story created by the data in a manner that would have meaning and relevance to the reader.

Building Conceptual Models

As each of the logical steps in data analysis was completed, I felt a need to put my understanding of the case to that point into a form that could help me to visualize my learning. These conceptual models contributed much to my own ability to think and communicate about the process undertaken to involve parents at Kizer. The first model developed during the time that I was transcribing the volumes of recorded data collected during the inquiry process. I was newly assigned to the role of home-school coordinator at Kizer Elementary and had several opportunities to communicate with groups of teachers, parents and university students about the project that was unfolding for which I had been granted a great deal of responsibility. The ensuing “Parents as Partners” project has been titled after an important chapter by the same name in *The Basic School*. This effort will be described in great detail in the pages that follow. It is mentioned specifically here in order to bring clarity to the conceptual models illustrated in this section.

As I was listening to the tapes and preparing to talk about the Parents as Partners project, it became apparent that there are three levels of service and activity affiliated with this new initiative at Kizer. These levels are represented pictorially in Figure 3-1 on the following page.

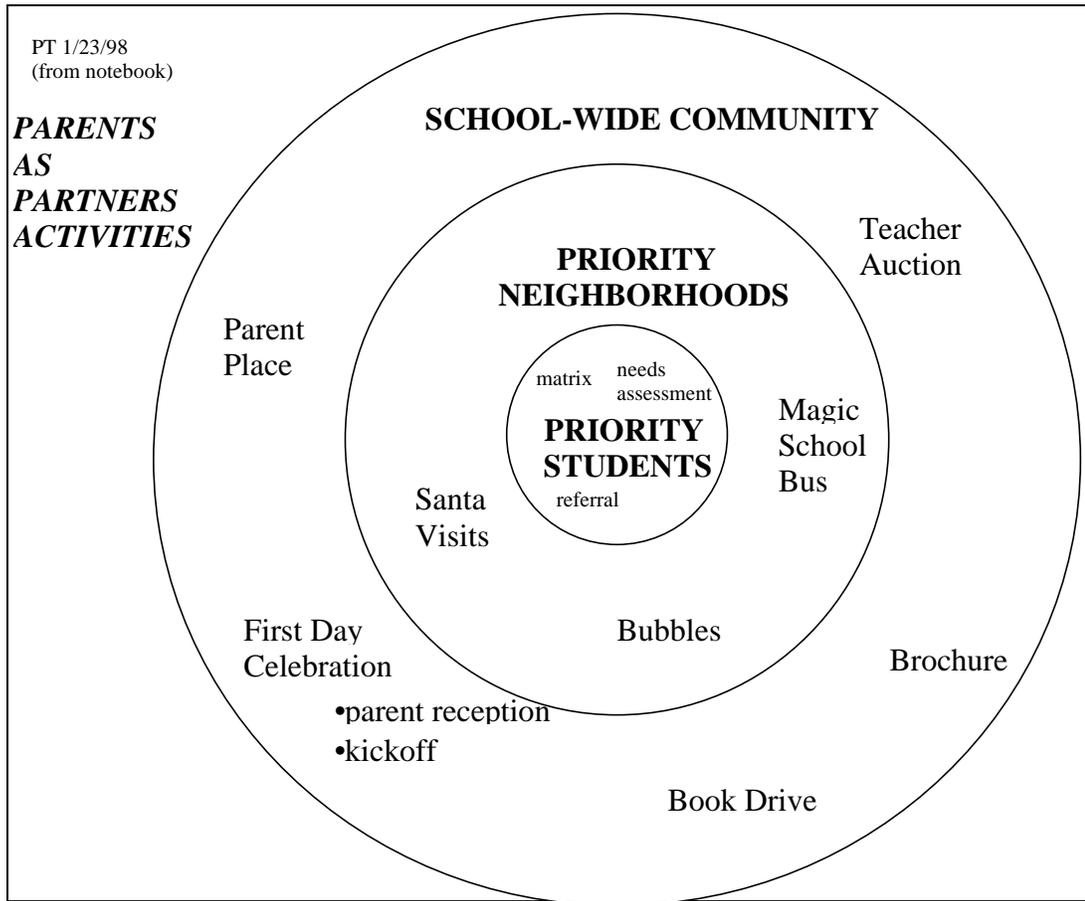


Figure 3-1 Conceptualizing Parents as Partners I

The Parents as Partners Project has components that involve the school-wide community in encouraging connections with all parents of Kizer Elementary students. Some components are geared toward reaching out to families in two particular trailer court communities that are served by Kizer. Another set of activities seeks to interact most intentionally with families of children who have been given a priority status because of specific needs and issues that are apparent to school personnel. The activities indicated in the diagram (Figure 3-1) are designed to address needs at each specific level of the project. These activities are described in detail in the case description beginning in Chapter 4.

A few days after this first drawing was scribbled into my notebook, I began to realize during my excursions through the data that there are six essential groups that have responsibility for various components of this project and a significant investment in its success. One of these groups is the original School as Community Family where the vision and initiative for this project began. A second group was formed when Larson County Public Schools offered district schools an opportunity to apply for local grant funds for programs designed to address the needs of their children at-risk. It was determined that the group pursuing this grant needed to include Karen Dreyfus, the school social worker, and Amy Fulton, the guidance counselor, neither of whom were a part of the School as Community Family. Input for the grant proposal was encouraged from all other interested faculty as well. The grant advisory group has been dubbed ARGA (At-Risk Grant Advisory) for the purpose of this study and report. A third group was created to include community members who have an interest in serving children's needs in the Kizer community by pooling efforts and looking beyond typical community roles that can prevent systemic change. This growing group has come to be known as KCCT, Kizer Comprehensive Community Team. Some of the members of this team are also a part of ARGA.

A program intended to include parents more effectively would not be complete without the group specifically dedicated to parent-teacher connections nationwide. The PTA Executive Board at Kizer has become an essential and influential body in the vision and activity of the Parents as Partners project. In addition, it is hoped that a newer group will someday be the

lifeblood of the project and sustain it over time. The Parent Advisory Committee (PAC) includes one member of the PTA board and a growing number of parents from the neighborhoods that we are attempting to reach most directly in this effort.

A sixth group is composed of graduate students in education that have recently joined the effort and added great energy and vitality to the project. These students, each with 50 hours of required field study to complete, are investing the necessary time and toil to create some momentum around the project. As with any new initiative, there are technical details, organizational structures, and clerical items that must be addressed. This group has already been an invaluable resource in managing these critical components and generating movement toward real progress.

Figure 3-2 illustrates an early conceptualization of how these six groups seemed to overlap with one another as they influence the Parents as Partners Project. When this diagram was first envisioned, I was not yet clear how the High Mountain Graduate Student (HMGS) group would interact with the other five. Circles representing the Kizer Comprehensive Community Team (KCCT) and the Parent Advisory Committee (PAC) were drawn with broken lines to indicate that membership in these groups is still growing. The diagram is indicative of my earliest understanding of the importance of the leadership of these six groups to the evolution of the project.

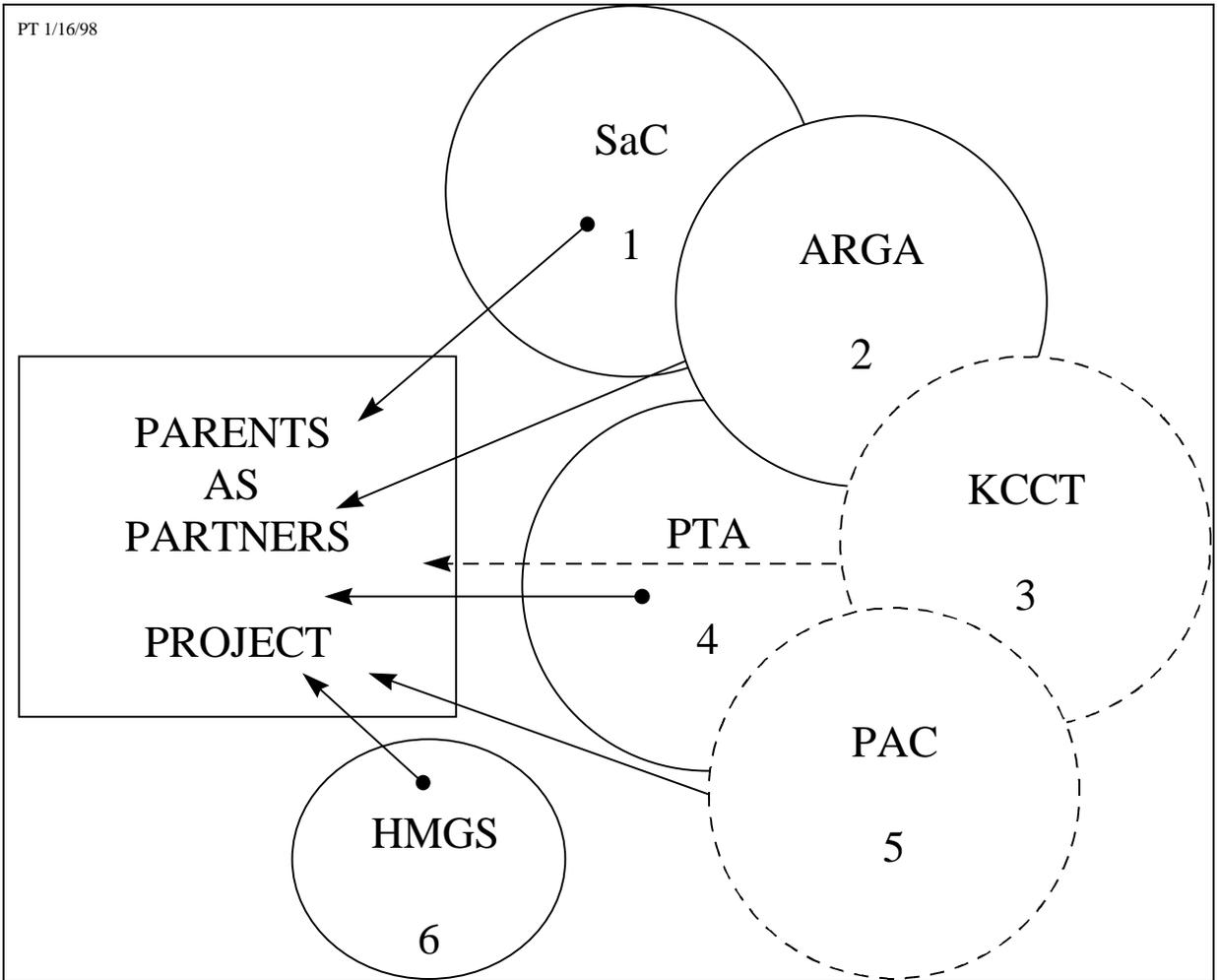


Figure 3-2 Group Interaction with Parents as Partners I

A third model demonstrates the ways that these groups interact with the project on the three priority levels. It is intended to demonstrate my understanding of the components of the project most influenced by the leadership of each group.

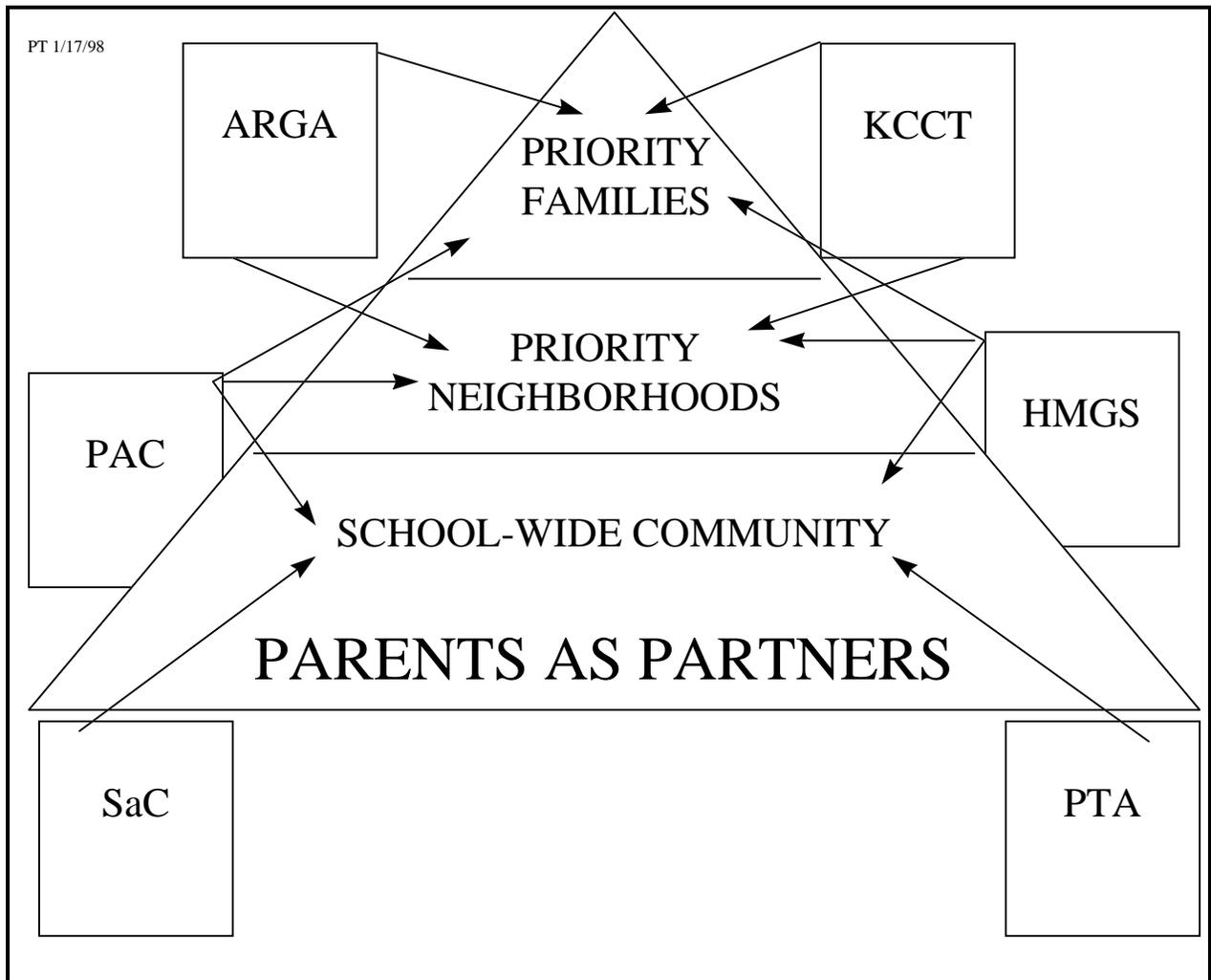


Figure 3-3 Group Interaction with Parents as Partners II

Although the School as Community Family initiated the efforts that eventually led to the Parents as Partners project, they are most directly responsible now for school-wide components, such as the “Parent Place” resource room that is open to all parents of Kizer students. Three members of the SaC Family are also a part of the ARGAs group that takes most direct responsibility for the other facets of the program including neighborhood outreach and priority student intervention. The PTA Board most appropriately deals with whole school initiatives. The PTA President, however, has been invited to participate as a member of the KCCT community group that has been most instrumental in providing wisdom, caution, and vision for the future of the project. The student group that works closely with me on all levels of the program deserves much credit for managing the initial details. It is hoped, though, that the Parent Advisory Group, with representatives from the PTA and the target community, will eventually guide all phases of the project as relationships are built carefully and sustained over time.

These conceptual models along with several other versions that developed through the process provided the building blocks for the inclusive representation of the Parents as Partners project in Figure 3-4. Early renditions of this diagram attempted to depict the six essential groups as the foundation of the project. This characterization is accurate in theory, but it was difficult to illustrate the relationship among the three levels of service with a triangular model (as in Appendix E). To clarify the fact that the priority family and priority neighborhood components are contained *within* the broader school community, the concentric circles used in the original model (see Figure 3-1) were employed once again. The relationship between the priority students, the priority neighborhoods, and the school should be clear since the priority students live primarily within one of the two target neighborhoods and both are a part of the school-wide community. For that reason, this model seems to best portray the multiple facets of the project and the interrelationships among them. The many dimensions of the initiative are expressed best with a three-dimensional model. In this way, the model demonstrates not only the influential groups and the project components, but the important themes that recurred throughout the analysis in all groups and each facet of the project. For this reason, triangles were replaced with circles and a cubic image replaced the two dimensions of a simple rectangle.

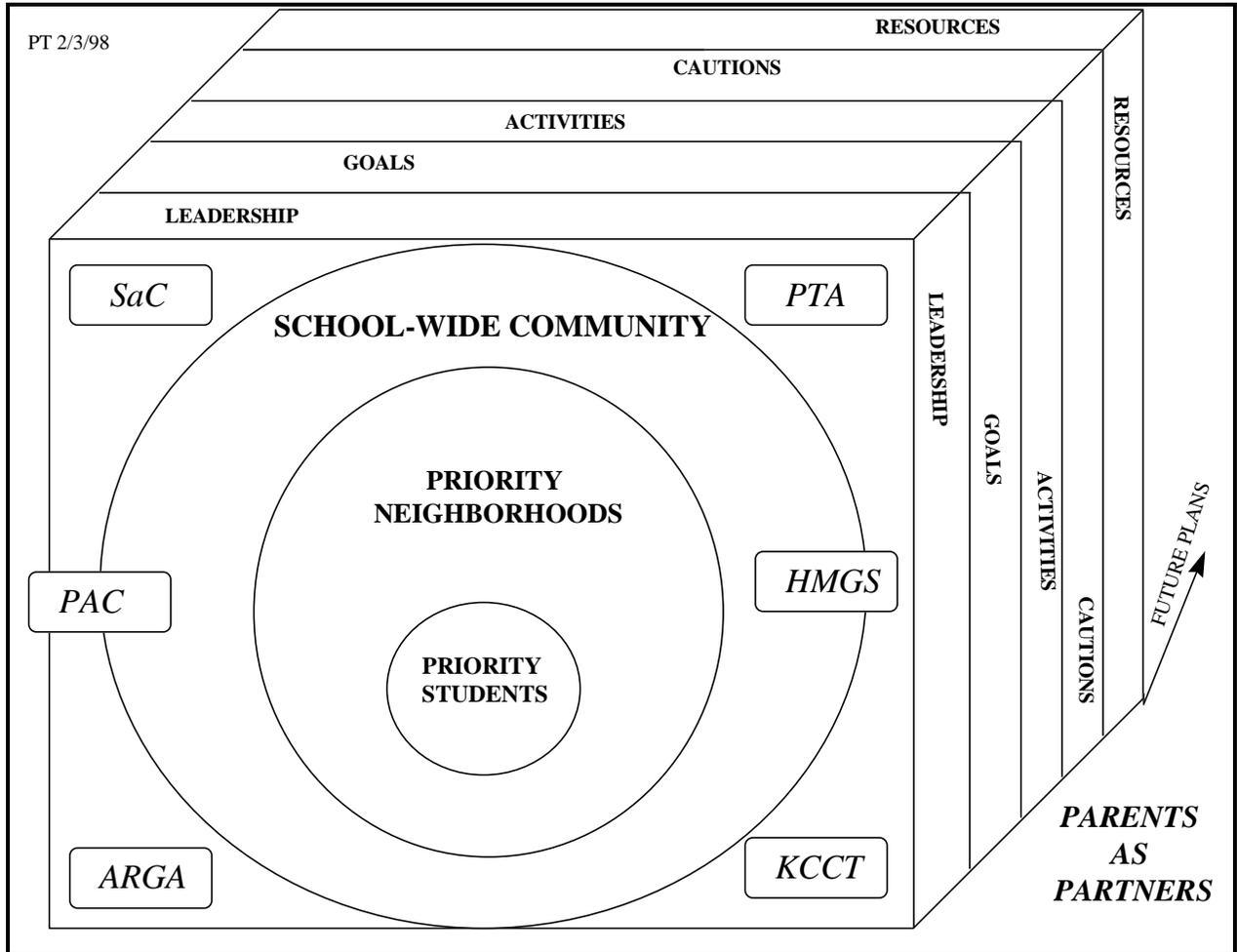


Figure 3-4 Conceptualizing Parents as Partners II

It was during my sixth pass through the data that this depiction (Figure 3-4) began to take shape. The three levels of the project, all sought to address specific *needs* through *activities* designed to meet those needs. Each level required *leadership* and that leadership was provided by the groups who influenced various components of the project in different ways. Some individuals who were members of these influential groups played an extraordinary role in influencing various phases of the project. Those individuals included Robert Walton, the building principal, Karen Dreyfus, the school social worker, and Amy Fulton, the school counselor. Fortunately, I am able to count myself among these influential individuals. Knowing the commitment and vision of the School as Community Family and having the opportunity as principal-intern to be a part of my first grant-writing experience, afforded me the opportunity to encourage development of the grant proposal in a direction supportive of the goals adopted by this Family.

In addition, every level of the project came with *cautions* and emotions that influenced the direction taken by the groups. A multitude of *resources* both informed the process and provided potential input for the *future* of the project. Ultimately, this forward-looking conversation developed into a broader goal orientation and a search for monetary resources to support those goals. One version of this diagram was color coded and utilized extensively in the last two passes through the data (see Appendix E) before I began the actual writing process. I found it most helpful to color code each unit of data to indicate which level of the project and which other facets (needs, activities, leadership, cautions/emotions, resources/input) were addressed within that unit.

The case study that follows tells the story of the development and progress of the Parents as Partners project to date. The study is to be understood from the perspective of educators beginning to initiate a process addressing issues that have been identified as essential to the education of children at-risk in their school. My own interpretation of those perspectives should be clear in the case description. The study does not attempt to take a familial view of the parents or children that we hope to serve and empower through this process. *That* important story remains yet to be told.

PART II

THE CASE

Prologue

The case study that follows is the story of how one school has begun to build a school community that welcomes and includes all of its rightful members. The next five chapters are a narrative account of a school's initial efforts at communicative action toward creating such a community. The narrative is interspersed with literature support for the steps taken along the way including words from Ernest Boyer's *Basic School: A Community for Learning* (1995). Boyer's work remains the foundation on which these efforts have been built.

The story is still young and the work remains tentative. Creating alliances where there have been few substantive relationships has proved to require a dedicated and patient effort. While we have only begun to realize the smallest and simplest fruits of our labor, I believe that there is wisdom here that can be used as a guide for others wondering where to begin in creating the critical family-school connection that is most essential to school success for children.

CHAPTER FOUR

Group One: School as Community Family Begin at the Beginning

In *The Basic School: A Community for Learning* (1995), Ernest Boyer outlines four priorities that he believes must be the bases for a sound elementary education. His first priority is defined as the “school as community.” He expands that priority to include three essential components that embody a healthy school community: 1) A Shared Vision, 2) Teachers as Leaders, and 3) Parents as Partners. Boyer defines these three facets of school community this way:

A Shared Vision. The Basic School has, as the first requirement, a clear and vital mission. The school is a place where everyone comes together to promote learning. Every classroom is, itself, a community. But in the Basic School, the separate classrooms are connected by a sense of *purpose*, in a climate that is *communicative, just, disciplined, and caring*, with occasions for *celebration*.

Teachers as Leaders. In the Basic School, teachers are empowered. Working together as teams, they serve as mentors to their students and have the time and resources needed to be professionally renewed. The principal in the Basic School is *lead* teacher, the one who guides the institution more by inspiration than directive.

Parents as Partners. In the Basic School, the circle of community extends outward to embrace parents, who are viewed as the child’s first and most important teachers. A vital partnership is created between the home and school, one that begins during the pre-school years, is strengthened when the child formally enrolls, and continues from kindergarten through grade five.

(Boyer, 1995, p.8-9)

When Kizer Elementary began examining the Basic School model for answers to the many questions regarding school improvement and planning, I was fortunate to be in a situation where I could learn from that school's experience. The principal seemed wise to place the ideas on the table and trust to see how they would blossom and change in the hands of teachers, many of whom were eager to continue their own learning. Prior to the last teacher workday of the 1996-97 school year, Mr. Walton had worked with the staff development committee at Kizer to construct a day that would introduce the faculty to the priorities promoted by the Basic School model. They attempted to create an atmosphere and structure where teachers could begin to think and act within those priorities. When June 13th arrived, teachers were divided among Boyer's four priorities (Community, Curriculum, Character, and Climate) into groups called "families" and given two tasks to think about during the day. First they were instructed to review the section in *The Basic School* that defines their assigned priority and to think together about what such a priority focus could mean for their school. They then were encouraged to devise at least one school-wide activity for the coming year that would draw attention and emphasis toward that priority. A second assignment was to pursue a connection for teachers and students across the traditional grade level boundaries. I was not assigned officially to any one family because, at this time, I was planning to end my internship at Kizer Elementary within a few days. I sat with the School as Community Family because of my continuing interest in the interaction between schools and the communities they serve.

Some family groups had a difficult time getting started that day. Some of the priorities seemed overwhelming and difficult to define in such a short period of time. Although the groups were constructed carefully by the principal, some inevitably contained mixes of people that found it difficult to work together. The School as Community Family (SaC) did not seem to have either of these troubles. When teachers from this group were asked to recall this day, they used words like *energy*, *excitement*, *enthusiasm*, and *dedication*, to describe their group experience (LG 10/16, RH 10/16, SS 10/17, CP 11/13). Leadership within the School as Community Family seemed to be shared easily as individuals connected with Boyer's ideas and expanded them to address some commonly understood needs in the Kizer community.

Goals

The SaC Family's purposes became tangible, if not completely clear, during their very first day together. Teacher Georgia Orion later voiced the issue of concreteness in the goals and activities suggested by the Community Family on that first day:

I think our family – School as Community – is one of the easier things to work on because it's very *concrete*. There are things that we know all along that we could do. Things we've already been doing. Things we want to do more of. And it's very easy to do a reception. It's very easy to do – well, I won't say opening day was easy, but it was *definite* things to do...Whereas character, climate, even curriculum is a little bit harder to see it concretely...(GO 10/16, lines 64-68).

This group produced the list of concrete ideas in Table 4-1 for addressing community issues at KES. I was enthused by the overlap between the intentions of these teachers and my own interest in the development of community-school initiatives. Over the summer, I made the decision to continue in my internship at Kizer Elementary. There was a most natural fit between my learning and research goals and the efforts of the newly established School as Community Family.

Table 4-1

IDEAS FOR SCHOOL AS COMMUNITY JUNE 13, 1997

<i>OUTREACH</i>	<i>FIRST DAY CELEBRATION</i>	<i>OTHER</i>
Ideas for getting in families that don't typically come in - <u>outreach</u>	Big gathering to begin	Not only "pull others in," → "take ourselves <u>out</u> " – artwork in partner businesses, etc.
Bus, Idea - Evenstart/Bookmobile?	PTA/ Seniors/Community/Volunteers so every kid has a "parent" for the morning	"Family" organized guest readers
How can we get out to Forest Mountain? Visit other schools who did it?	Invite "partners" to participate in opening day celebration	Parent room organization
Increased home visits	Without disrupting kids - Do it later? Day-long open house?	Parent volunteers/ Senior volunteers "Check in"/greeter
"Family" element to that	Hot air balloon Cheerleaders, football players?	How about transportation to events? (continue childcare)
"Draper Aden" Partnership - Take advantage of those.	Separate thing for kindergarten?	What about family events out of school?
Think of ways to include Forest Mountain parents in opening/early celebration	Alternative activities for parents Refreshments in cafeteria or rooms	School community service with partnership
Preschool connection	Invite new superintendent	World community – postcards, Internet

Three themes from this first day as a family have recurred often in the ensuing months: 1) the need to reach out to the Forest Mountain community, 2) a way to celebrate the opening of school, and 3) a place for parents to call their own. Reaching out to Forest Mountain has turned out to be a harmonizing theme for the School as Community Family from the beginning. Special Education Teacher Cary Price later expressed some of my own sentiments about the day:

CP: There didn't seem to be a lot of divisiveness between us like there was on some of the other committees and the Forest Mountain issue was one...families in that place was something that every single person in our Family could really relate to. Now we might have different ways of wanting to do that. Some people feel comfortable going out there a lot. I remember in my mind I was thinking more of ways to get those people into school, but we needed both things. I remember though that I felt like that was a unifying thing with us. The fact that we could...all just see the need to connect with that Forest Mountain place. (CP, 11/13/97, p. 2, lines 44 - 52)

Similar sentiments about Forest Mountain have been expressed by other SaC Family members as well as additional Kizer faculty, parents, and educators from elsewhere in the county school system. Themes of concern range from general malaise and hardship that affect children's learning to specific difficulties encountered by these families with recurring housing and landlord troubles (J, 7/14, p. 2-3; ARG, 11/10, p. 12-15).

Literature Support

Boyer's concern for creating community in schools is supported vigorously in the popular professional literature (O'Neil, 1997, Maeroff, 1998). The concept often is aligned closely with the idea of creating a climate conducive to learning, another of his four priorities (Sawatzky, 1997). As educators struggle with academic issues, most recognize that children are unable to achieve without an environment of support and caring for their endeavors. In Thomas Sergiovanni's *Building Community in Schools* (1994), the author speaks eloquently of the internal support systems and communicative relationships essential to learning and developing

leadership among teachers and students. Interestingly, though, parents seem to be absent from Sergiovanni's community. Granted, his purpose is to address the structures within the school that support or impede learning, but to exclude parents from those structures seems counter to the school community endorsed by Boyer.

Nowhere else did I find this omission. The extensive publications of the National Community Education Association, the Charles Stewart Mott Foundation and United States Department of Education on the subject of community education put great emphasis on the essential involvement of parents in the learning communities created for children. McCaleb's beautiful book, *Building Communities of Learners: A Collaboration among Teachers, Students, Families and Community* (1994) is a rich example of the possibilities. McCaleb describes the fertile classroom culture that can be attained only when families are drawn in as *active* participants in the learning community.

Research and reports on creating school community are dispersed largely across the more specific topics of 1) parent and community involvement in education (Epstein, 1995; Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler, 1997), 2) comprehensive service models (Dryfoos, 1994; Nesin, 1993), 3) teacher preparation for community-building (Morris, et. al., 1996), and 4) curricular practices that develop community in classrooms (McCaleb, 1994). Since the School as Community Family was confronted with the broadest definition for creating school community, it is no wonder that they moved quickly to *concretize* their work.

Activities

Beginning Outreach

During the summer, two of the projects that the SaC Family envisioned for creating school community actually began to take shape. Two of the teachers who had volunteered to take on extra responsibility as the "Parent Involvement Coordinators" for the coming school year decided to act upon the group's interest in pursuing connections with the neighborhood at Forest Mountain. They spoke over the summer and planned a reading event that would involve

traveling to one trailer court, reading a story to the children there, and involving them in a simple follow-up activity. Ann Rowland and Laura Grant contacted the trailer park manager to arrange a date and place for such an outing. They were pleased when she readily seemed supportive and offered to set up a tent to designate an area for this purpose. As it turned out, the manager did not provide the tent as promised and it rained on the first date set for the outing. Ann had visited the neighborhood a few days before to put up flyers advertising the event. The day that it rained, she went back and placed new notices in the doors containing the latest date and time. Ann described a bit of nervousness and uncertainty about how to do this since some of the trailers had clear “No Trespassing” signs posted. Dogs chained to the sides of some of the mobile homes were also a bit intimidating. Needless to say, some homes did not receive flyers (J, 7/28; 8/13).

After rescheduling, this first outreach activity finally took place in early August. The day that we arrived for the project, there was a small crowd of children ready and waiting outside the manager’s home. The teachers brought a story about bubbles to share with the children along with a small, plastic backyard pool, jugs of water and dish soap for blowing soap bubbles. They had loaded the backs of their cars with hoola hoops, fly swatters and other unusual items for making bubbles along with some more traditional tools including pipes and bubble-guns. After sitting patiently for the story, children blew bubbles and stepped inside the swimming pool and hoola hoop to enclose themselves within the giant-sized soap walls that could be created around them. Each child was given a small jar of bubble-soap to take home after the event (J, 8/13).

Together, the four of us who participated in this activity counted the day as a success. The twelve or so children that joined us seemed to enjoy themselves. It gave us a way to tell them that we were looking forward to having them back at school very soon. Only one parent came out to talk with us. She asked me if we were from the church or the school and indicated that they were new to the neighborhood. She chatted pleasantly for a while after coaxing her bashful children to join the others in the fun (J, 8/13).

Before we left, we told the kids of our plans to come back one more time before school started (J, 8/13). These plans never materialized as teachers became sidetracked by planning for the next big event.

First Day Celebration

Another idea that was initiated in the planning of June 13 was the notion of a “First Day Celebration.” SaC Family teachers agreed with Boyer that to begin the first day of school with a feeling of welcome, anticipation, and festivity would send a positive message to the community that we serve. Instead of rushing parents away that first morning, we would offer refreshments and a chance to visit and connect with the people responsible for sharing the burden of teaching their children. So that children would not feel left out, we would offer snacks for them in the classrooms, too. Toward the end of the day, we would invite parents back to their child’s classroom to talk about the events of the first day and each child’s learning goals for the year. Everyone in the school would be asked then to gather around the flagpole outside where we would hear a few words of inspiration from the principal, sing the school song, and give a cheer to applaud the beginning of another year of learning and growth (SaC, 8/12).

This event took quite a bit of preparation and negotiation. Teachers are not accustomed to this kind of send off and although most of them were enthused by the prospect of something different and celebratory, there were anxieties, especially among the kindergarten teachers. Kindergarten teachers worried that children would be confused and stressed enough during the day that anything extra would be too much for any of them. They liked the idea of having parents come back to school in the afternoon to assist with getting children on the busses. So much activity first thing in the morning, however, was thought to add distraction to a day traditionally filled with some tearful little ones and anxious teachers and parents (FR, 7/15; SaC, 8/1/2).

In the end, it was agreed that we would try this approach this once, giving the kindergarten teachers plenty of volunteer help and negotiate any changes before the next school year came. Plans were narrowed substantially from their beginnings (SaC, 8/12). The notes from June 13 (Table 4-1) illustrate the preliminary plans for a hot air balloon, cheerleaders and a band; all first thing in the morning. None of these ideas came to fruition as we heeded the many words of caution that were expressed over the summer.

Cautions

The emotions and anxieties that were a natural part of the process, along with the ways that teachers decided to address them, were major topics of discussion in the summer planning meetings. These cautionary messages are represented along with the action taken to resolve the concerns in Table 4-2.

Table 4-2

First Day Worries

<u>CONCERN</u>	<u>RESPONSE</u>
Hot air balloons are too expensive.	Helium balloons were used instead to create an atmosphere of fun and celebration.
Can kindergartners handle this?	Lots of volunteer help was provided.
The plans are too complex and elaborate.	The plans were pared down considerably
So much activity at the beginning of the day will be confusing for kindergartners.	The bulk of the event was moved to later in the day.
It takes a long time for kindergartners to get ready to ride the bus especially on the first day.	The event was moved back about a half hour in the afternoon and volunteers were provided to help load the busses.
Some kids will not have a parent around for this special day.	Community helpers and those specialists without classes were assigned to “buddy up” with a child whose parents could not attend.
Some parents have more than one child at Kizer.	The structure was made “loose” enough that parents could spend a little time with each classroom.
Kids are going to get “squirmly” if we do too much outside.	The outside part was kept to about 10 minutes.
Kids will want to go to the reception for refreshments, too.	Teachers received donut holes and juice for the children to have in their classrooms first thing.

(FR, 7/15; SaC, 8/12)

As it turned out, the morning reception for parents easily accommodated small children. Older children seemed satisfied with the donut holes and juice in their classrooms. That afternoon, parents were invited back for a brief time in the classroom before the gathering outside. It was all rather informal and relatively easy (SaC, 9/17). After the event was long over, several SaC Family members recalled their impressions of this day and the process of readying themselves for it.

G: To me the biggest controversy was...discussing the opening day. The time frame for that and what was going to happen and just felt like a lot of teachers were concerned about that adding to the craziness of opening day anyway, but as we talked about it several of them said, "Well, it's worth a try one time. It's not going to hurt to try it once." And I felt like the attitude was pretty positive about that. (GO, 10/16, 1)

S: I was...I guess I'm sort of glad that we chose the first day celebration to do partly because it's over. (Laughter!) Also because that's such a great kick off – way to start the year with the community. (SS, 10/17, 1 - *a first year teacher*)

S: Part of it was good for me because it gave me something to focus my energy on that first day because I was so nervous...The only part for me that was maybe a little difficult or confusing was when the parents came into the classroom. What exactly we were supposed to do with them?...It was a chaotic day...I only had four or five parents. But it was kind of like they hung out there in the back of the room and I didn't know exactly what to do, but I think. . it was the first year and there's bound to be some of that. Maybe that was just because it was my first day. I don't know if any of the others felt that way or not...(SS, 10/17, 6)

C: I think that the main thing that I remember from that was a sense of – I think we all got really excited by the ideas – especially the part about welcoming people in – being real welcoming and having- especially kicking off-making the opening of school something that was a family time and a community time and

something that should be a big celebration. I know that everybody got really psyched about that and loved the idea and the main thing that I remember going through my mind though was...I always jump to actualizing things. What would it take? And I remember we got into the hot air balloon and all of this stuff and I was thinking “Okay, this is the last day of school. We’re talking about the first day of school.” How?...WHEN would this happen?

I also remember feeling torn, you know like not wanting to rain on people’s parade either. So that’s the biggest thing that I remember from that day was that it was fun and it was exciting and I felt like we were a good group, but I felt like we weren’t really thinking nuts and bolts there about how we would do some of this stuff. We were getting way – way, way, way carried away! (CP, 11/13, 1)

C: And then I remember when we sat down together in our first meeting before school started and we really did start looking at how much time did we have and what were we going to be able to do and also some of the feedback we got from our colleagues that day when we stood up and said, “These are some ideas.” And the kindergarten people just turned pale. You know, it wasn’t like...I remember GK even said, “I’m sorry, but this is making me feel sick. (Laughter!) I don’t think I could do this the first day of school.” And then we realized, too, that we really didn’t have much time to actualize it...We started getting narrower. And then I remember someone saying, you know, Robert said not to try to do too much. Let’s just pick one big project and we sort of said, “Okay, well this will be ours” (CP, 11/13, 3).

Resources

The ideas presented in Boyer became a springboard for the plans of the SaC Family. Other than that, members relied largely on their own experiences and contacts to put these two events together. Many Kizer teachers have been familiar with an effort taken on by another local elementary school to read regularly at one of the trailer courts in their school community. The Bubble activity was patterned somewhat after that model in which some of these teachers had taken part in the past. The main difference is that this trailer community has no Laundromat or

central facility in which to place a regular reading outreach program. Such activities in Forest Mountain are, therefore, very much dependent on the weather.

Family members drew upon their friends and university contacts to bring in extra volunteers to help with the first day celebration. Business partners and community representatives were invited to come to help us kick off the new school year and fill in where parents could not be present. Our volunteer and parent sign-in system did not work very well because there was such a rush of people coming in the door. For that reason our best estimate of the number of people (105) that we had to help is based on teachers' reports of participants in their own classrooms. The written feedback from the Kizer faculty was compiled and shared with the staff (see Appendix H). This input will be an important resource as the group looks to planning school community celebrations in the future.

Future

Feedback from the First Day Celebration was generally very positive (see Appendix H). Most agreed that celebrating and welcoming the community into the school were admirable ways to begin a school year. The School as Community Family seems to have tentative plans for a similar event for the next school year with adjustments based on our experience and feedback from this first attempt. In the midst of structuring each school day, plans for this celebration are far from the minds of SaC Family teachers.

For a while it also seemed difficult for teachers to act any further on their second goal of reaching out to the Forest Mountain community. Once the rhythm of the school year began, teachers' attention naturally was diverted to the concerns of their individual classrooms. Thankfully, a resource appeared that kept this vision from fading. A timely initiative, approved by the School Board and the new Superintendent in early September, brought hope to the ambitious intentions of the School as Community Family. This initiative will be discussed at length in Chapter Five.

CHAPTER FIVE

Group 2: At-Risk Grant Advisory

Money Always Helps

Finally, each Basic School should, we believe, have a parent coordinator, someone specifically designated to lead the home partnership program – greeting parents when they come to school, organizing parent education workshops, helping teachers with voice-mail messages, operating home-work hotlines, and arranging home visits. The coordinator could be a parent volunteer, a senior citizen, or a college student fulfilling a commitment to a community service program.

(Boyer, 1995, p. 60)

Leadership

Like Boyer, I felt that a parent coordinator would help significantly in the efforts at Kizer to involve parents as part of the school community. My suggestion to include a “Parent Involvement Coordinator” in the list of extra teacher duties for the year was, I think, a step in the right direction. Interest and leadership on the part of teachers were not difficult to find, especially within the original SaC Family. Some teachers seem to have a predisposition toward reaching out to involve parents. I pondered this in my research journal on more than one occasion (J, 10/14, 11/11).

One of the things I want to look at is the kind of special nature of the teachers that are willing to take this on and willing to go way beyond their typical duties. Teachers like Ann Rowland that take kids to ball games or out to restaurants...the ones who go to the trailer park and blow bubbles. Maybe what’s here is something about the spirit of the people...that drives them to go beyond. I

think it's a characteristic in a lot more teachers than they're given credit for...What is it in that environment that nurtures the caring side of people? Even the ones that don't find that they have the capacity to go beyond...almost seem to wish that they did. (J, 10/14, 3)

Three SaC Family members volunteered for the newly assigned "parent involvement coordinator" role that was intended to draw attention to the need for concentration in this area even before the SaC Family established their goals. One teacher in particular has taken that role of parent involvement coordinator very seriously. She has sought out information from Internet resources and has tried new ideas for getting parents of students in her own classroom connected to the school (LG, 10/16).

At Halloween, Laura Grant scheduled a pumpkin carving activity where parents came to the classroom to work with their children on carving, sorting, and weighing activities. At Thanksgiving time, she sponsored a family feast in the evening. The day before Valentine's day, Laura invited all of her students' parents to come to school to decorate their child's desk as a special party surprise. Laura's efforts have been very successful. All except one or two families have been represented at each of these events (LG, 10/16; J, 2/13). This teacher is clearly taking her role as parent involvement coordinator to heart. She is trying new things with her students' families and looking for resources to guide her while considering what this means for others in the school.

Teachers, however, can only do so much to involve parents beyond their own classrooms. Laura expressed this to me as she bemoaned the fact that it was unclear to her what she could do to foster development of other teachers in the area of parent involvement. Perhaps, we decided together, the best she can do is to show a positive example and share her ideas and experiences with others (LG, 10/16). Beyond this, some substantial change would be needed to organize a school-wide initiative to involve parents broadly in the life of the school.

Early in September, something happened that showed great potential for supporting such a change. I received a phone call from Robert Walton who was excited about some news that he

had just received from the Director of Student Services for the school district. The school system was offering a total of \$42,000 to be dispersed among county schools to address the needs of children at-risk. A decision had been made to send out a request for proposals so that individual schools could submit grant recommendations in a competitive environment with the hope that innovative programs might produce positive results for children within the county. Mr. Walton asked me to assist in developing a proposal on behalf of Kizer Elementary both because of my internship status and his knowledge of my interest in all issues related to children at-risk. My immediate response was to suggest the possibility of hiring an individual who could assist in the implementation of some of the priorities set by the School as Community Family (FR, 9/10).

A series of meetings with interested faculty led to a proposal for the Parents as Partners Project (see Appendix I). The goals of the proposal, and ultimately the project itself, were aligned closely with the initiatives of the SaC Family. Despite this fact, the group decided that it was essential that the project be connected to the values and goals of the entire school. It seemed logical to utilize the additional expertise of the social worker and counselor who, although not a part of the SaC Family, understood the clear relationship between their program goals and the needs of children at-risk (ARGA 9/23). Initial visioning for the grant proposal was open to all interested faculty and eventually narrowed to a group containing the principal, the social worker, the guidance counselor, the reading specialist, two classroom teachers, one parent, and myself. One of the representative teachers was Laura Grant, our active parent involvement coordinator. Four of us were also members of the SaC Family. This At-Risk Grant Advisory guided the proposal process and, in time, the formal implementation of the program.

Goals

From the outset, the At-Risk Grant Advisory (ARGA) acknowledged the same concerns as the SaC Family regarding the needs of the Forest Mountain community. Connecting with parents of children from this neighborhood was seen as the essential key to helping these children to succeed in school. In addition, absenteeism was viewed as a major barrier to school success by this group along with transportation issues that can inhibit children's school attendance and

parental participation in school events. This group grappled with ways to improve school attendance and engage parents in problem solving to better the academic achievement of their children (ARGA, 9/23). The following excerpt from the “Parents as Partners” Grant proposal states the original goals and objectives of the project most explicitly.

1. *To increase overall school attendance and engagement of the at-risk student population at Kizer Elementary School, we will:*

- identify students who have a pattern of attendance problems;
- arrange parent contacts to discuss (a) obstacles to regular attendance, (b) methods to eliminate those obstacles and (c) a collaborative plan of improvement; and
- develop a mechanism to stay abreast of attendance problems and an early response system to prevent/eliminate ongoing obstacles to regular school attendance.

2. *To increase involvement of the at-risk parent population at Kizer Elementary, we will:*

- build relationships that permit open communication between families and school personnel;
- determine and address obstacles to school involvement by parents in the target population;
- provide programs and resources of interest to the parents of children at-risk at our school based on direct input from the target population; and
- establish consistent school-home contact through regular phone calls, home visits and notes of encouragement.

3. *To improve service delivery to targeted families through open communication and collaborative community efforts, we will:*

- develop a network of community, business and university resources ready to assist in addressing the needs of the at-risk community at Kizer and
- more effectively address individual needs of at-risk students and their families as they arise through early attention and connections with appropriate resources and support.

4. *To prepare school faculty to assist and support Goals 1-3, we will:*

- provide effective and relevant in-service training to all school faculty regarding barriers to parental involvement and mechanisms to overcome those barriers;
- gather and share information regarding research and programs that have been successful in involving parents that do not typically connect with schools; and

- provide opportunities for representative teachers to visit schools where successful strategies for involving parents have been employed.

Since this plan's inception, additional weight on goal #4 has been added to emphasize the role of the classroom teacher in the implementation of the activities that will support these goals. If the first priority of this endeavor is to build connections between the teacher and the parent, teacher readiness and active participation will be key to the project's success.

Literature Support

We found validation in the literature for our approach to serving students at-risk in the elementary school by connecting intentionally with their parents. The substantial works of Don Davies (1991, 1993, 1996), Joyce Epstein (1987, 1995), Vivian R. Johnson (1996), and Patricia Burch (1993) place a heavy emphasis on parent and community partnerships for student success. Epstein and Davies are co-directors of the Center of Families, Communities, Schools and Children's Learning at Boston University who collaborate with others in the field of family-school connections, including Johnson and Burch. The Center's main function is to study the use of action research in building stronger linkages between schools and the families they serve across this country and abroad in a far-reaching project called "Schools Reaching Out." These researchers report great strides in building partnerships that support the learning communities in schools. Action research seems to be the methodology of choice for these scholars who recognize the need for incremental steps and continuous improvement.

Other documented studies in the field of parent involvement range from those intended to assess the effects of parent involvement on academic achievement (Epstein, 1991; Nesbitt, 1993; Schiamberg and Chun, 1986; Singh, et al., 1995) and describe program components (Beane, 1984; Fruchter, Galletta and White, 1993) to those that look at typical family interactions with schools and the implications for school leaders (Becher, 1984; Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler, 1997; Chavkin and Williams, 1987). Additional works of Davies (1988), Eagle (1989), Evans, Engler and Okifuji (1991), and Toomey (1992) look at the particular challenge of involving the

families of students at-risk and those of low socioeconomic status in the life of the school. These are the families that the Parents as Partners project targets most specifically.

Researchers who focus on the involvement of parents of low socioeconomic status were most informative regarding the hurdles that would have to be overcome if we are to engage parents that have not been involved with the school previously. Literature supporting partnerships among family, schools, and communities is quick to remind us that there are reasons for the lack of involvement of some parents. Johnson (1996) asks us to:

Imagine for a moment how involved we would be if we:

- were uncertain about food, shelter, heat, or clothing for the foreseeable future;
- had one or more babies or toddlers at home and no available child care;
- didn't speak English very well;
- didn't finish high school;
- didn't do well in school . . . (p. 22)

Often educators are not cognizant of the barriers that keep parents away from the school. Goldstein, Campbell and Bynum (1991) describe the chasm between high risk parents and the schools as an “unnecessary war” that can be forestalled with deliberate action steps that support families in sharing responsibility for the success of their children with the school. Many of the strategies outlined in the Parents as Partners plan are supported directly by the work of these authors and Renee White-Clark and Larry E. Decker (1996) of the National Community Education Association. Employment of a home/school coordinator, home visitations, transportation and child care assistance along with the active and sincere pursuit of parental input are all mentioned specifically.

Activities

The ARGA team grappled with ways to overcome obstacles to the involvement of the uninvolved parent population at Kizer. The goals and potential activities to address those goals in the grant proposal placed a considerable emphasis on building the capacity of the school to engage parents in the efforts to educate their children and building the capacity of the family to participate actively in resolving issues that are standing in the way. We hoped that by approaching the efforts systemically, the potential for long-term success would be bolstered greatly (ARGA, 9/23).

Over the course of several meetings, ARGA planned activities and procedures that would implement the goals and objectives outlined for the project. In the grant proposal (Appendix I), they were stated this way:

During the 1997-1998 school year, we will:

- 1. Establish a committee that will include the guidance counselor, the school social worker, the school principal, and interested teachers to oversee this project. (September, 1997)*
- 2. Employ a part-time home-school coordinator (HSC) to assist the steering committee in achieving the goals and objectives as listed above. (November, 1997 – June, 1998)*
- 3. Use input gathered through early parent contacts to establish a parent resource room, plan parenting programs of interest to this group, address issues related to transportation as they arise, and arrange for volunteer child care at all school events that involve parents (November, 1997 – June, 1998).*
- 4. Provide inservice training and opportunity for teacher learning regarding how to “involve the uninvolved parent” (January – February, 1998).*
- 5. Seek sources of additional funding to sustain this program after the pilot year.*

In addition to the funding for the part-time home-school coordinator, an important part of the project budget was a transportation fund. This fund was left somewhat flexible so that it might be used to address transportation issues as they arose. Examples of transportation problems that inhibit school attendance are the bus related difficulties that lead to a young child's fear of coming to school. When a car is not available, the child is stranded at home if the bus becomes implausible. Children who qualify to take the "Medicaid Taxi" to medical appointments often miss an entire school day because this resource is only available to transport the child from home to office and back again. Parents often do not come to school for family events or parent teacher conferences for a number of reasons. These reasons might include discomfort with the school environment itself. One obstacle to parent participation that might be addressed comparatively easily, however, is the issue of transportation. If parents are unable to come to school, school personnel can make the effort to go to their homes or pick them up and bring them to the school for important meetings (ARGA 9/23; ARGA 11/10).

The proposal, which requested \$10,000, was funded at \$9050 and began a process of intense scrambling to address the specific goals and objectives as they were intended. The first essential step was to hire the home-school coordinator to oversee the implementation of these efforts (ARGA, 11/10).

Somewhere during the time that I was working with ARGA on the process of developing this proposal and a more explicit job description (see Appendix J) for the home-school coordinator, I began to consider the possibility of pursuing this role for myself (J, 10/14, 10/24, 10/27, 11/12). I obviously have a strong interest and investment in the project since I was instrumental in its design. We had hoped to encourage our counselor-trained parent volunteer in the group to apply for this part-time position. When it appeared that the requirements of the job would not work for her because she has small children at home, I decided to actively seek employment as the home-school coordinator (HSC) and Parents as Partners project director at KES. Mid-year, I was the only applicant and certainly the one with the most history pertaining to the goals and objectives of this particular project. My role, therefore, changed from researcher-intern to researcher-HSC in late November 1997. For me the change meant an opportunity to

focus more intensely on the process that I was studying from a position of leadership while receiving some monetary compensation for my work (J, 11/16, 11/24).

Priority Student Matrix

For the purpose of the grant proposals, the term *at-risk* was defined by the school district as students in grades kindergarten through three who are receiving free or reduced price lunches. This made identification of the target population fairly straightforward. As we got into determining specific goals for the project, however, it was important that we match our own definition of risk more closely with the perceptions of the faculty who serve children directly. During the time that I was still in the role of administrative intern, I began working on a way to define a caseload for the home-school coordinator so that she might begin addressing the goals of the project as soon as possible. In order to make the most out of this individual's limited time with us, we needed to have some procedures ready for her to begin work as soon as possible after she arrived. It seemed important to prepare the school for a new colleague and for that colleague to arrive with a clearly defined role. The readiness process continued into the time when I made the decision to seek out the job of the At-Risk Home-School Coordinator and into my first weeks in that position (J, 10/24, 10/31,11/24).

I started to work on a priority-student matrix (see Appendix K). The matrix development process began with a list of all Kizer students along with their street addresses, number of absences and whether or not they qualified for free or reduced price lunches. Teachers were asked to give the names of the students whom they would want to make certain appeared on a caseload for the home-school coordinator. This was done in informal conversations with teachers rather than by survey because I feared that this type of information would be difficult to share and dangerous to put in writing on slips of paper that inevitably are laid carelessly aside. Some test data also was included on the matrix for those fourth grade students that had taken the Stanford 9 standardized test during the previous school year and had scored lower on achievement than ability. The principal and the school counselor were each asked to review the list and mark those students who they would consider to be *educationally at-risk* as well. The

school social worker for the district reviewed the matrix as well to mark those names of students with whom she was already working. In this manner, we could work toward supporting the efforts of one another without duplicating roles or getting in each other's way.

It took quite a while to finally decide how to use this matrix in determining a caseload. At first, we hoped to include all students with three or more indicators of risk. There were so many in that category (91) that we considered using an initial cut-off point of five indicators instead. That would reduce the caseload of the part-time HSC to thirty-seven students. Since I had accepted the position of home-school coordinator by that point, I began to feel quite nervous about the feasibility of actually approaching and visiting the homes of that number of students. It seemed overwhelming to think about simultaneously implementing the other important components of the program (J, 11/16, 12/19).

This is where the discussion of different *levels of service* began. Could we offer those students with three or more indicators one level of service while providing those with four or more indicators with more intense interventions? Perhaps we would send a letter about available services to those with at least three and call or make home visits to all of those with more. Even focusing only on students in kindergarten through the third grade, this prospect seemed daunting. How could we explain the reasons for our visits to some homes and not to others (A, 11/25)? I was anxious about the reception of parents who might feel singled out and intruded upon. How do you tactfully show up at a doorway only to explain that a son or daughter has many indicators of risk that precipitated our visit? This strategy seemed ill advised and awkward. Even if we omitted this information, it seemed reasonable that parents should expect some rational and respectful explanation for such visits. More deliberation was needed to determine an appropriate strategy that would establish needed contact while protecting families from unwarranted intrusion (J, 11/16, 12/19).

A visit to Critzer Elementary School in Pulaski County (J, 12/1) and several conversations with members of the SaC Family posed a possible solution. We decided to consider all students who showed up on the matrix with three or more indicators *priority-students*. Faculty at Critzer found this term to be less stigmatizing. We tended to agree. The term priority-student seems to focus more on the response of the school rather than some defect in the student or his family. By considering priority students we could know that all children in that category would be given priority status by the home-school coordinator. Priority status indicated a need for a method of easy communication between HSC, counselor, teacher and principal. Attempts to interact with the parents of priority students would be tracked carefully so that an intervention plan could be developed as soon as possible when necessary (A, 11/25; SaC, 12/3).

We adopted a referral form also used by Critzer Elementary (see Appendix K) for the purpose of easy communication and follow-through. This form is two-sided. One side is structured for the teacher to record attempts at communication with the parent. This is to be completed before turning the form in to the principal, counselor, or HSC. When a form is submitted to this intervention team a conference is held to determine the best strategy for intervention. Often these conferences are quite informal. Merely touching base in the hallway or cafeteria frequently takes the place of a scheduled meeting. Actions are recorded on the opposite side of the page along with responses from the parent. Forms are stored in a confidential file in the principal's office for referral as needed by any member of the intervention team. The home-school coordinator is primarily responsible for keeping track of referrals and interventions on behalf of priority students. All members of ARGA are available for consultation as needed.

Cautions

Cautionary messages related to the work of ARGA were numerous. Some circumspection came in my own cognitive meandering voiced into my recorded research journal while others were evidenced in conversations with individuals in the ARGAs group. A sense of wariness regarding my role as home-school coordinator began to grow. I wondered how I was to

place myself within the system and support the role of the teacher (J, 12/19). These concerns are explored in the description that follows along with some reservations regarding how and why we were promoting the practice of home visitations.

We realized from the outset that the limited funds from the grant would hire a home-school coordinator for no more than fifteen hours per week. When I was hired to fill that position, calculations were made based on a prorated teachers' salary scale and my years of experience with the school system. It turned out that the position would be funded for twelve hours per week through the end of the school year. Despite my investment in the project and commitment to its success, I had to realize that I could not dedicate more than two days per week to the project and meet my other personal goals for the school year. Time was running out on this dissertation process. I needed to spend a substantial amount of my time sitting in a chair and writing (ARGA, 11/10; J, 11/21).

This reality forced a confrontation with the goals of the project and the involvement of the classroom teacher. My internal conflict created what I believe to be a positive turn for the future of the project. We were compelled to look at the role that the classroom teacher must have in the process of involving parents in the school. That role could not be taken lightly. As I looked back at the grant proposal along with the HSC job description and pondered my own place in the project, it became clear to me that my role in the process was to facilitate connections between the home and the school; i.e. the *parent* and the *teacher*.

Critzler Elementary supports this philosophy by allowing their home-school coordinators not only to visit homes and make connections with families, but to take over teachers' classrooms at times so that the teachers can make visits and phone calls themselves (J, 12/1). Will teachers be prepared to take these kinds of initiatives? Teachers generally have not been trained in how to involve parents in their classrooms or even how to encourage learning opportunities at home. Home visiting can be a foreign and uncomfortable notion. One important part of the home-school coordinator's job is to support and prepare teachers for these efforts (ARGA, 11/10).

Unfortunately, one scheduled in-service training session on this subject was canceled due to poor weather conditions (J, 1/27). It is my hope that this opportunity will arise again in the near future. I have provided the SaC Family with materials on “Preparing Teachers for Parent Involvement” (Decker, Gregg and Decker, 1996) and “Reaching Hard to Reach Parents” (White-Clark and Decker, 1996). The group seemed appreciative of these resources, but to my knowledge no one in the group has taken the time to make much use of them. Again, time and energy at cross purposes are difficult issues with which to contend.

The Kizer faculty is accustomed to providing input on any big decisions that will affect the life of the school. It was apparent from the outset that seeking teacher leadership in the Parents as Partners project was crucial to its success. Frankly, there were times when simplicity would have called for independent decision making. I made a deliberate effort to quell those instincts because of a deeper commitment to the long term success of the project (SaC, 9/17, 17; ARG 11/10, 15; J, 11/12, 5; A, 11/25, 22). Accomplishment of project goals ultimately will depend upon teacher initiative, teacher readiness, and teacher ownership in the purposes of the parent involvement initiative.

Readying a school for parent involvement requires much preparation. Particular care must be taken as we begin to involve teachers in home visits. Home visitation as school practice is a most engaging idea because it is not without controversy. Discussions with the school counselor led me into a period of intense questioning about our motives for participating in home visits. Are we promoting this practice just for *show and tell*? Are we doing it just so that teachers will understand the hardship in their students’ lives and, if so, does this justify its practice? We must understand our motives in all that we do. I could not promote home visitation based alone on the premise that teachers must understand the lives of students with whom they work. Such understanding, though important, somehow does not seem to warrant the intrusion into family life (A, 11/25).

The added benefits of the communication link between home and school might be achieved in settings other than the family home. People have the right to keep their private lives private. They have the right *not* to invite people into their homes. Home visitations are *not* an essential ingredient to school community. The community of learners that we seek might overlap into the home, but we cannot assume that educators will be welcome there until extensive work has been done on building respectful relationships. Most of us choose to invite only those with whom we have an established relationship into our homes. The notion that educators would visit a student's home for any reason other than legitimate communication about educational objectives is highly distasteful and, I believe, disrespectful (J in A 11/25, 3). A discussion with the guidance counselor and my later journal entry is further indication of a discomfort with this issue from the teacher's perspective as well.

P: I wouldn't want to come across as thinking that it's a must – it's an absolute must. I think it's a real "plus" and a positive – a step in the right direction when we do that. It gives parents – and I even put this when I wrote my little paragraph about home visits ... "If you can't come to us, we're glad to come to you because it is very important that we talk." And I think parents need to know that we will show up on their doorstep if we need to communicate with them, but it's not that we're trying to check out their surroundings. We're not coming to check them out! We're coming because it's important that we talk to each other.

A: Well, see I think the *must* part that I feel is that I feel that in order for us to go forward as public educators, we *must* start to have a better realistic appraisal of where our kids are living and where they're coming from because we *must* be able to know that for some kids – *scrap* learning about Egypt! *Scrap* learning about the ecosystem...For God's sakes, *realize* that some of these kids are dealing with *basics*; your *basic* needs on the hierarchy and that if...a kid who comes to school and is dead tired, dead on his feet then his basic need is sleep. We've got to provide him with a place to sleep and some food before we can even *think* about teaching him something. And I just believe that most teachers have grown up in other different circumstances and don't have a clue.

(I agree with what Amy is saying here so much. It still troubles me though that we would ever appear to visit homes to inspect things.)

I think this topic would be worthy of a real “heart to heart” discussion with teachers because it IS important that they have a realistic picture of the realities of their students. At the same time, I am very queasy about the notion of visiting parents under false pretenses – no, that’s not quite what I mean – we would have legitimate reasons to be there, but it feels just a bit like an ulterior motive. How can we do both; help teachers to understand and spend plenty of time building trusting relationships that are HONEST and OPEN with parents – maybe it can’t be done.)
(A, 11/25, p 7-9).

At this point, I sought guidance from the literature to assist me in sorting through my dilemma. There, I was reminded that home visits support the ecological approach to intervention by encouraging *goodness of fit*. Schools can best mold themselves to fit a clientele that they fully recognize and understand. “(H)ome visits would allow teachers to glimpse, and ultimately to understand, the challenges that face families in poverty or despair, and to begin the process of working with families and human service agencies to ensure that those needs are met through an array of available services” (Smrekar, 1994, p. 59). The relationships that are so essential to success can be built best in an environment of mutual consideration and effort. When educators demonstrate that they are willing to do whatever it takes to facilitate effective communication, parents may feel more inclined to participate as well. Home visits can be an active and intentional link between home and school.

On the other hand, one cannot underestimate the importance of family privacy and the need for family autonomy. When “lives considered private move to a public, if protected, sphere as parents are encouraged to share problematic elements of the family life with teachers,” (Smrekar, 1994, p. 57) individual families are bound to balk at the intrusion with good reason. Caution must be practiced in promoting practices that blur the “comfortable buffer zone, protecting parents and teachers from further intrusion into their hectic, busy lives...” (Smrekar, 1994, p. 58). If educators make the mistake of plunging into yet another grand idea in education without careful reflection upon their motives, they are liable to meet with solid resistance from fellow teachers and parents alike.

Nevertheless, I can agree that home visits can be an effective tool for working with families to address issues related to parenting, literacy, social and emotional development, and school success (Cohen, 1991). One might surmise that home visits will increase parent involvement and since parent involvement is linked to increased achievement, home visits will increase the academic success of children. Certainly a positive home visit experience could increase a teacher's perception of parental support and a parent's perception of teacher support. I would caution, however, that making the home visit positive for everyone requires more than just a willingness to knock on doors. It requires thoughtful, respectful steps toward building the relationships that make us welcome there.

Resources and the Future

As you will see in the remainder of this document, many steps have been taken to fulfill the goals of the project and there are many plans for further progress during the coming months. There is preliminary talk of a summer reading program at the school and transitional preschool activities including home visits for incoming kindergartners. Such preschool visits might permit teachers to build relationships with students and parents before the school year begins that could aid in appropriate preparations that will benefit all students.

A second grant proposal has been submitted for the purpose of supporting monthly reading activities on site in the Forest Mountain community. Two teachers in the SaC Family have agreed to lead this effort should that funding become available. None of these dreams, however, can possibly become fully realized without some person with ultimate responsibility for seeing them enacted. Ideally, that person would work full time with the continuing support and guidance of the teachers who envisioned the project in the first place (see Appendix N). It is quite unclear at this time whether or not the local grant funding that supported the initiation of this project will be available for the next school year. Even if funds are available, it is certain that the role of home-school coordinator will be filled by another individual since my plans are to

seek full time employment in school administration. Discussion has already begun in the ARGA and SaC Family groups about how to continue the efforts of the project without me next year. It is the hope of the group that another home-school coordinator will be hired to continue the efforts of the project in a way that teachers and counselors, with their already saturated schedules, cannot. Funding for the continuation of the Parents as Partners Project is an issue of current concern before ARGA and a third group known currently as the Kizer Comprehensive Community Team (KCCT). The collective wisdom of the membership of KCCT, whose story is told in the next group case description, has guided the progress of the project considerably.

CHAPTER SIX

Group 3: Kizer Comprehensive Community Team

Wisdom Born of Experience

Clearly, schools are caught in a dilemma. On the one hand, they encounter, daily, children who have physical and emotional needs that cannot be ignored. On the other hand, schools are *educational* institutions. They cannot and should not become “social service centers,” act as surrogate parents, or seek to solve every family problem.

We propose, for the Basic School, a middle ground.

(Boyer, 1995, p. 155)

Leadership and Literature Considerations

The Basic School dedicates a chapter within the “Climate” priority to “Services for Children.” It is here that Boyer specifically discusses the needs of children at-risk of school failure. As evidence of the significant overlap between the basic priorities of climate and community, this issue crept naturally into the development of the Parents as Partners project.

Boyer is adamant that schools remain primarily *educational institutions*. He does not seem to encourage the shift toward “full service schools” as such, but acknowledges that a “child who is sick, tired, hungry, or abused will find it difficult, even perhaps impossible, to be a confident, self-directed learner... Responding to the physical and emotional needs of children is both the educational *and* ethical thing to do.” (Boyer, 1995, p. 153- 154)

All of the comprehensive service models discussed in Chapter Two address education from a decidedly ecological perspective. The notion of actively involving, supporting and nurturing families is central to each of them. Each emphasizes the importance of community-school collaboration. By integrating services to nurture the whole child, the school reaches

beyond its traditional academic role to assist with readying children for the demands of the school and readying *themselves* for the realities of the students with whom they are entrusted.

Efforts to integrate services for children exist along a continuum from mere *cooperation* where the goal is simply to “stay out of each other’s way” in providing children’s services to *coordination* of services where the goal is to provide complementary services and avoid duplication. The point on the continuum where a common vision is developed, resources are shared and power is evenly dispersed is the point where true *collaboration* may be claimed (Intriligator, 1994, Whitaker and King, 1994). The degree of community agency accessibility differs among models depending upon individual community characteristics and needs along with the degree of commitment to the comprehensive service concept.

Boyer might be considered *tentatively* supportive of this approach. He clearly cautions schools to remember their intended educational function for society, yet his words very much support collaboration and services for children so that they are able to take advantage of the education offered them.

Basic Health Service
Basic Counseling Service
Afternoon and Summer Services
Networks for Children

Children *can* become a community priority... We are confident that with the right blend of commitment and imagination, communities in this nation can come together, once again, this time on behalf of children. (Boyer, 1995, p. 170)

My own perspective acknowledges Boyer’s concerns, but maintains an orientation toward comprehensive service models as one possible mechanism for gaining the momentum needed to make children the *community priority* that he describes. The Department of Educational Leadership in the College of Human Resources and Education at High Mountain University

offered a conference titled “New Era of Comprehensive Services” in the fall of 1997. This conference was held about the same time that the Parents as Partners project was about to start rolling at Kizer. I was working with the Educational Leadership Department as a graduate assistant during the planning stages of this conference. As a result, I felt a certain amount of obligation to take a team from Kizer to show support for a program that was supportive of my developing commitment to comprehensive alternative approaches to at-risk issues. As potential participants we were encouraged to put together teams of community members to represent schools. The idea was to spark an interest and to create some local initiatives to address issues of risk through community collaborations.

I discussed the possibility of taking a team from Kizer with the ARGA committee and began to initiate contacts with various community agencies based on input from that group (ARGA, 9/23). Three members of the ARGA team along with two university professors, one administrator from the local Headstart program, the local coordinator for Project CHIP (The Comprehensive Health Investment Project), and our school psychologist traveled to Abingdon, Virginia on November 14, 1997. The PTA President and a couple of representatives from the school’s business partnerships were invited, but unable to attend (KCCT 11/14).

After a morning of seminars on subjects related to comprehensive approaches to education such as *service learning*, *grant writing*, *business partnerships*, and *successful collaborations*, we were finally able to sit together and talk as a potential community team. Our conversation was brief, but fruitful enough to initiate a series of monthly meetings and a growing group of community members interested in diligently working toward connecting community resources to better serve the needs of youth and children at-risk. Several of the members have had extensive experience with collaborative efforts across agencies. Others of us are extremely interested in advocating for such efforts in our area (KCCT, 11/14, 12/15, 1/20).

Goals and Activities

Prior to this first meeting, Robert and I had talked briefly about what we hoped to expect from the conference. We decided to go with an open mind and determine the goals of the rest of the group, but to also keep present in our own minds the hope for community support of the Parents as Partners project. We rode in separate cars on the trip so that we could compare notes on the conversations of the group en route to and from the conference since no vehicle large enough to transport the whole team was available (J 11/11).

As it turned out, after a few minutes of brainstorming at this first meeting to assess the goals of individual members, I asked Robert if it might not be prudent to talk with this group about the Parents as Partners Project that was already beginning at Kizer. The group quickly agreed that it made sense to add the progress of this collaborative to the strength of the Kizer initiative for family involvement. The following purposes and goals were listed in this group's first session together.

Purpose:

- Improve education of children
- Address the total child

Goals:

- Help families to help their children
- Connect more effectively with parents
- Improve school attendance of at-risk youth
- Improve services to children at-risk and their families
- Growth and sustenance

(KCCT, 11/14)

Each subsequent meeting began with a review of activity since the group's previous interaction followed by reflection on productivity and discussion of potential next steps (KCCT

12/15, 1/20). This group had an orientation toward envisioning the future of the project from the outset. The expertise of the KCCT membership advised and informed the project on a philosophical and conceptual level more than all other affiliated groups. Despite an effort to involve all of the groups intellectually, the other five were more involved necessarily with the logistical tasks important to get specific events and activities planned and actualized. This group had the luxury of spending its time on creating a future for the project and for itself.

In the second meeting of KCCT held in December, the group decided that it “may be about *facilitating the networking* for a successful comprehensive program.” Instead of jumping into developing a program from the outset, we needed to wait to determine services and assistance that could be provided to address needs as they were identified through the efforts of the Parents as Partners project (KCCT notes, 12/15/97). Building the critical relationships that will enable parents to assist us in identifying specific needs had already proved to be a long, slow process.

Cautions

Matching the dreams and resources of this group with the needs of the target population will continue to be essential to creating and maintaining the school community toward which we are working. From the outset, this group provided many cautionary messages. These warnings have kept us away from extravagant plans that we cannot possibly accomplish. Money is limited and our dreams are lavish. We were reminded repeatedly in the KCCT setting to set priorities, start modestly, and grow as resources become available (KCCT 11/14; KCCT 12/15).

KCCT meetings also yielded reminders that to “target families up front could scare them off” (KCCT 11/14). It is these repetitive cautions of the community team that ring in my ears each time that I catch myself beginning to approach the project a bit too enthusiastically. Though enthusiasm is generally one of my strengths, it could be this eagerness that kills the project if we frighten away the very people that we are attempting to reach in our efforts. Again and again, I have been reminded to put “first things first” in this project. Notes from the second KCCT

meeting remind us how important it is to take the time needed to make meaningful and respectful connections with parents and to use those relationships to listen to parents before we make decisions that affect them. We must begin with trust building and work diligently to *empower* parents to make genuine decisions *with* us. It is important to identify powerful parents that could serve as leaders to help get others involved. We must strive to get parents active in the decisions that we are making in the groups affiliated with this project. We must make certain that parents know that we acknowledge that they are the best experts on the needs of their own children. We need *them* to educate their kids (KCCT 12/15).

A second requirement that this group made very apparent was the need to define the problem from the parental perspective *before* we try to determine solutions. Approaching a needs assessment skillfully and respectfully is tricky business. There are issues that group members predict will arise. These include water payments, poor credit history, and affordable housing. All of these issues can indirectly impact a child's ability to focus and learn at school. Until the trust is built to begin to work *with* families to create solutions together, however, *we must not act* (KCCT, 12/15). We must also continue to consider the proper role for school personnel as we begin to interact more deliberately with families and social service agencies.

Many admonitions from this group guided me as home-school coordinator and teachers new to the practice of home visitation. CHIP workers never visit a home without a first contact. It is much more respectful to prepare a parent first with a phone call or letter (KCCT, 1/20). I now attempt to make it a practice never to visit a home without some preliminary counsel to the parent about my intentions to do so. Of course, when there is no telephone in the home and the need for the visit is immediate, this rule cannot be followed. Ironically, this is the situation that usually leads to the need for a home visit in the first place.

Resources

Each time this group has met, more suggestions for contacts have emerged. We have received advice on sites to visit and individuals who could shed light on various aspects of our work, along with likely new group members who may suggest directions for the future. So many potential resources were offered in the course of KCCT discussions that it seems most efficient to represent them in table form (see Table 6-1). In addition, national resources such as the Full Service Schools Network and the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development may link us to sites that are coordinating services for children and families in schools across the nation. These networks along with The National Community Education Association have been mentioned as possibilities to educate our collaborative work together in KCCT.

Table 6-1
Potential Resources

<i>SCHOOLS</i>	<i>BUSINESS</i>	<i>UNIVERSITY</i>	<i>COMMUNITY</i>	<i>INDIVIDUALS</i>
LCPS - Parent Resource Ctr.	Draper Aden	Service Learning	Parks and Rec.	**
LCPS - Sp. Ed. HSC	Rainbow Riders	Project HOPE	Community Action	**
LCPS - Director Student Services	NBB	HM - English Dept.	CSB	**
LCPS - 6TH grade study	Healthcare	School of Social Work	DSS	**
Giles Co. Public Schools		HM- CHRE - EDRE	Free Clinic	**
Critzer Elementary - Pulaski		HM-CHRE	Office of Family Support	**
Bowling Park - Norfolk		Knowledge group	CHIP	**
Willard Model - Norfolk		Housing specialists	Headstart	**
Richmond program		Nutritionists	Legal Aid	**
NC - Cary			Project SHARE	**
Roanoke City				**
Richmond program				**

**names omitted

Future

In the immediate future, KCCT will continue to meet monthly to consider the progress of the project and to discuss its future. New members have been invited into the group regularly. Since the first meeting we have added to the group the coordinator for the Parent Resource Center for special education in the district along with a representative from the Office of Family Support. Most recently, contact has been made with a grant writer from Larson County Public Schools and a Public Health Nurse from the local health department with the hopes that they will join us at a meeting in the near future. At long last, two parents from the target community have been invited to the upcoming meeting of the Kizer Comprehensive Community Team. They have enthusiastically accepted this invitation and finally will add the parent perspective that this group has identified as the critical link to success from the outset (J, 2/18).

The commonly acknowledged need for food led to group discussion of possible participation in Project SHARE, a local initiative of Community Action that distributes surplus foods at low cost in exchange for monthly donations of community service (KCCT 1/20). The possibility of Kizer becoming a SHARE site was proposed to the school faculty and the PTA Board which resulted in the development and distribution of an interest survey. At this writing, we are in the process of gathering these surveys from all adult participants in the school community including faculty, staff, parents of Kizer students, and others in the neighborhood surrounding the school. Of the forty-five surveys that have been returned thus far, eighteen have expressed an interest in participation and six of those are interested in helping to organize the project (J. Schultz, personal communication, February 23, 1998).

Most recently, possibilities for involving fathers in the target communities have been discussed without resolution. While we are hopeful that some dads will be involved in Project SHARE, our minor successes thus far have been limited to the participation of mothers. Ideas have been explored that might provide opportunities for male involvement in filling some community needs which have been identified by fathers. Building projects that could include a

community shelter or playground at one of the Forest Mountain sites were suggested as mechanisms to bring fathers together in an effort to benefit their children. Again, it is important that we build connections and relationships before needs can be fully assessed. Still, projects can sometimes serve as the instrument for both relationship-building and needs assessment (KCCT 1/20).

This group has dreams that relate to the development of literacy, health and well-being for children in the Forest Mountain community. They offer the current best potential for community resources to make those dreams come true, but the effort is still young and the vision is yet ill-defined. Discussion of a strategic plan for this group was determined to be the next essential step as they establish their individual and collective levels of participation and support for the Parents as Partners project at Kizer. Boyer's words of caution will need to be kept in the forefront as we consider the implementation of community initiatives that we hope will positively impact upon students' learning.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Groups 4 And 5: PTA and PAC

Priority Input

Research establishes, unequivocally, that parent engagement has a positive impact on students' academic achievement, behavior in school, and attitudes about school and work. Further, when teachers were asked to identify the *one* issue that should receive the highest priority in public education policy, the vast majority said "strengthening the parents' roles in their children's education" (Boyer, 1995, p. 48).

We hear a lot of talk these days about how schools have failed. But what's becoming clear is that it's not the school that failed, it's the *partnership* that's failed, with schools taking on responsibilities that families and communities and religious institutions once assumed.

Overwhelmingly, parents want to do right by their children. They worry in the dark of night about their future and most parents, even those with busy schedules, would like to be more involved in schools. Frequently, however, they are confused about just how they can most appropriately fit in. And we even heard complaints from some parents that when they did reach out to schools their overtures were rejected. Former secretary of education Terrel Bell summarized the problem this way: "A lot of schools advocate parent involvement, but they don't have a specific program to get it done."

The Basic School has a plan.

(Boyer, 1995, p. 49-50)

Leadership

Kizer Elementary also has a plan. Perhaps a bit belatedly the Parents as Partners project has begun to involve parents in the leadership of that plan. After much gentle chiding from the KCCT group (KCCT 11/14; KCCT 12/15), we began in late December and early January to take steps toward gaining input from Kizer parents: first the Parent Teacher Association and then a group of parents from the priority neighborhood. Of course, the PTA president was informed and invited to participate in ARGA and KCCT from the beginning, but the meetings of those groups did not fit her schedule so we had only one parent representative on ARGA for a while and none as yet on KCCT. Principal Walton and two of the SAC Family teachers attend PTA Board meetings monthly. They began with brief reports to that group about the goals and plans for the project early in the Fall. It was not until January that we made official monthly reports and requests for input from the PTA Board into a regular part of my role as home-school coordinator and project director (PTA Board notes, 1/7).

One member of the PTA Board, Denise Politis, is designated as the Education Chair for the year. In the past this role involved attending school board meetings and keeping abreast of political issues that might have a bearing on education in the State. This year, her role to-date has been rather unclear. Since January, however, she has been assigned to act as a liaison between the PTA Board and the second parent group that we are calling the Parent Advisory Committee (PAC). For the most part, the goal of this group is to involve parents from the target community that typically are not directly involved with the school. Thus far, Denise has not met Peggy Gray and Holly Graves, the two parents from Forest Mountain who are the core members of PAC. Illness and scheduling difficulties that seem to come with any effort to get groups together and talking have stood in the way.

Currently PAC is meeting about once a week on Wednesday mornings for coffee and conversation. Peggy and Holly have eagerly accepted my invitation to advise the progress of the project and are gradually taking on greater leadership and initiative as time passes. Letters have been sent and phone calls made to prompt interest from other parents in the neighborhood.

Individuals have been suggested by the guidance counselor, the principal, and the social worker who are quite familiar with the Forest Mountain families. So far, this probing has elicited the input of only one additional parent who has expressed a willingness to think about the project and keep her ears and eyes open for suggestions from others in her community (J, 2/18). Another parent has agreed to come to school for future PAC meetings followed by some time with her son in class, if transportation can be provided. Those plans are currently in the works (HSC Daily Log).

Goals

Unlike the goals of the first three groups, the parent groups that are involved with Parents as Partners have yet to designate specific objectives for themselves in the project. Instead, the goals of these groups are more implicit and implied. Generally, the purposes of this PTA Board seem very similar to those of other PTA groups with which I have worked in the past. This is the group that plans events, staffs the office, and sells T-shirts and wrapping paper to lend financial support to school projects. They tend to be tuned into the rhythm of the school and quite comfortable within its walls. The Board is there to lend support to the work of the teachers. Many of them acknowledge, however, that there is a broader parent community that does not necessarily share in the fellowship for learning at the school that is so natural for these women. They have voiced a desire to become more inclusive though there has been impatience expressed with families that have enough money to go to skating parties, but not to join the PTA (J, 2/5).

The parents participating in PAC, on the other hand, show a different kind of leadership. So far PAC represents only the two parents who live in the Forest Mountain community mentioned previously. Holly and Peggy have been eager participants in morning coffee every Wednesday for more than a month now. They have begun to speak more and more comfortably with me about ways to connect with families from their community. These two parents have advised me in methods to communicate invitationally with families so that we would not frighten away those who are already hesitant to come to school. Peggy and Holly seem to have adopted the goals of the project as their own and are showing signs of ownership in its success. For the

last two weeks they have brought gifts for the Parent Place when they arrived. First they gift-wrapped a “mouse pad” that they had purchased for the computer that had been donated for the project by the local University. They have supplied books and printed material from their own parenting collections and toys for preschoolers that we hope will come to the room with their parents. Peggy came to the reading celebration at the shopping mall recently and proudly showed me the materials that she had picked up at each of the display tables for us to use to stock the Parent Place. She called my home to inform me about a computer printer for sale at the local YMCA Thrift Store and has even volunteered to serve as the Kizer mascot if we can get a costume for her to wear at school events. These gestures seem to represent a genuine investment and commitment to the Parents as Partners project.

These two parents who seem to be caretakers of the children in their community are providing the essential perspective that until recently has been absent from the project. Short-term objectives will be apparent in the “Activities” section of this chapter. A long-term vision for the group, however, has yet to be discussed.

Challenges from the Literature

The literature provides ample evidence of the need for parental participation in schools and interesting insights into why we have so much difficulty creating a school community that welcomes and encourages the very family support that we require (Dwyer and Hecht, 1992). In addition to literature cited earlier that describes the obstacles that can prevent parent involvement with schools, we must seek strategies that can be enacted to overcome those obstacles. The current predicament of the Parents as Partners project is a case in point. We stand ready to receive parental input, but are unskilled at knowing how to encourage it and unsure of what to do with it once we have it.

First, we must determine our goals for parent involvement at Kizer. Do we seek a genuine engagement on the part of parents in the education process or only extra classroom help? Are the steps that we are taking, however cautious, moving us toward an authentic school

community or do we just want students to start doing their homework? “A thorough parent involvement program indeed thrives in that same climate of collaboration that is important for any other kind of growth at the school level” (Swap, 1986). Understanding the ecological nature of human existence supports close associations between the family system and the system that exists within the school. What, then, should these associations look like? Most scholars recommend something more than help with bulletin boards and homework. As in comprehensive service models of all kinds, many even promote the concept of support *for* the family as well as support *from* the family. In Boyer (1995), there is some disagreement over the role that schools should play in assisting families. There is little disagreement, however, over the importance of family support for schools.

We certainly hope for parental support of our educational efforts, but are we willing to open decision-making power to genuine parental input? The National PTA has published *National Standards for Parent/Family Involvement Programs* and a *Teacher’s Guide to Parent and Family Involvement*. Both of these documents, along with the works of Gareau and Sawatzky (1995), Goldstein, Campbell and Bynum (1991) and White-Clark and Decker (1996) stress the importance of substantial parent conversation surrounding all of the major decisions of the school. In an era of reform, we can no longer promote ourselves as experts who know best what to offer children educationally without input from the people who know those children best.

Kilmes-Dougan, et al., (1992) studied the involvement of low income parents in schools and found some indication that simple invitational interventions can make a difference. In both studies reported in this article, the researchers found that telephone calls and personal invitations for involvement of parents in school events tended to increase participation. Flyers and promotional brochures alone were not enough. The brochure advertising the Parents as Partners initiative emphasizes the importance we place on parent-teacher communication (see Appendix M). We advertise that we believe this input is so important that we are willing to provide transportation, child care, and home visits to obtain it. Our small amount of experience seems to support Kilmes-Dougan’s findings. Thus far parents who have been invited personally by teachers, counselor, principal, or HSC to take advantage of services offered by the project, have

responded very positively. No one, however, has contacted the school requesting home visitations or transportation to school events.

Agreement among the Kizer faculty is still unclear on this subject. Popular professional literature has many examples of publications promoting parent-school communication in general (Gelfer, 1987; Kwarta, 1988; Newman, 1995; Rich, 1995) and home visitations in particular (Fox-Barnett, 1995; Heleen, 1992; Holifield & Donner, 1995; Johnston & Mermin, 1994; Rich, 1996). Home visits come up repeatedly as a helpful strategy in comprehensive service literature and in other specific disciplines relating to the health and well-being of families and communities including community mental health, social work, and healthcare. The fact that there are individuals at Kizer offering the home visiting strategies which are promoted in the education literature, however, does not yet demonstrate any substantial or systemic change. On the other hand, some slight progress might be claimed following each of the early activities of the Parents as Partners project in the last several months.

Activities

Santa Visits

Before we could hope for the direct parent leadership and goal development already discussed, we had to create some way to reach the parents that we were hoping to involve in the project. The planning and thinking of ARGA and KCCT led to a kick-off event just before the winter holiday. From the beginning we had been continually struggling with how to connect and involve parents from the Forest Mountain community. I officially began my job as home-school coordinator the last week of November. We started immediately to make plans for an event that could launch the project and portray it in a positive light. We discussed the possibility of focus groups and receptions but could think of no comfortable way to gain participation in these events. A brainstorming session with Amy Fulton and Robert Walton led us to the idea for a traveling party that we have since come to call our "Santa Visits" (A, 11/25).

The Forest Mountain community actually contains two trailer parks that between them house more than twenty percent of the Kizer student population. The Bubble Activity over the summer had taken place only at Forest Mountain I. This time, we reserved a school bus, purchased Christmas cookies and punch, hired a Santa Claus, donned elf hats, and headed for an afternoon of fun at each of the two trailer courts after school on consecutive days. As holiday music played in the background, Santa passed out candy canes and listened to the children's Christmas wishes while the rest of us served refreshments and visited with the children and their families (J, 12/18, 12/19).

My original thought had been to pass out the brochures that we were creating to promote the project at this event. A timely KCCT meeting (12/15) heavily emphasized the care needed to prevent overwhelming parents with too much information too soon. Instead of using the brochures then, we opted to create something much simpler and more in line with the holiday spirit. A festive flyer in holiday colors bearing only the words "Parents are Partners at Kizer Elementary School. Have a Joyous Holiday" was tied up with Christmas ribbon and handed out to parents as we greeted them. Children who were present without their families were given a flyer with a request to make sure that their parents received it. Each flyer had a printed "color and cut" page of gift tags on the back. It was our hope that this holiday greeting along with some simple refreshments and fun for the children would communicate two brief messages to parents: 1) we care about your children and 2) we value your participation in their education (J, 12/16).

The experience gained at both Santa Visits was informative and enlightening to the group members directing the project. I reflected on these outings in my research journal the following day:

...It's the morning after our first Santa Visit to Forest Mountain I. After it was over, Robert said that he had asked Amy how she would rate it on a scale of one to 10 and they both said "about a 7" which all things considered, I don't think was too bad. I would agree with it. Maybe a "6." I was disappointed in the number of parents that came down to see Santa Claus with their kids. We had probably three that were actually parents of Kizer kids and then we

had some parents that kind of stood off in the distance. One of the guys – a kind of older looking guy that somebody called “Papa” I think, came up right before we left and I offered him some food and he said, “No, I’m too fat already.”...He and another fellow had stood down faraway leaning against their trucks looking on, but like they were there for their kids and they really didn’t want to get involved. The people that were there...I have to be honest that I felt a little uncomfortable. Amy tried with one particular person to say, “I want you to meet my friend Mrs. Talbot. She’s here and she’s going to be trying really hard to make some connections with parents.” That was nice and she said that today she’s going to try to do more of that when we go to Forest Mountain II. There were two fellows that came out with a baby that were at a trailer right next door and they didn’t stay very long and...so I guess...one of those guys was the dad of a little baby that will someday be a Kizer kid, but I don’t know...They were a rough looking crowd. They were friendly and the kids seemed pleased but also a little awkward. The whole thing was just a little awkward I guess for everybody, but it was just a little effort and I hope if nothing else they got the message that here’s a school bus coming out from the school to do something fun for their kids (J, 2/18).

The second outing to Forest Mountain II went a little more smoothly. By then we had a feel for what to expect, and we jazzed it up a bit by broadcasting Christmas songs over the bus’s intercom system as we approached. That way families could hear that we had arrived while we made a drive through the park before stopping near the playground and basketball courts.

I think probably we picked up maybe 5 or 6 of the kids while we were going around that heard the music and came running out...We had probably 6 or 8 parents that joined us (and dozens more kids at the playground). More than the others yesterday at Forest Mountain I, for sure, but the very most positive thing was that I had a conversation with two parents, one named Peggy Gray who ... opened up the flyer and said, “Parents are Partners. Now, what does *that* mean?” And I said, “Well, it means that parents are partners at school and we need to encourage that. We have a new program that’s intended to encourage more of a partnership with all of our parents.” And so she went on to tell me about going to a couple of PTA meetings and having people stand up there and tell you how you should do it without asking you anything about your opinions or what you think and she said . . .that’s not a good feeling. She used the example of if we had asked the children where to put

Santa Claus instead of us just deciding where to put Santa Claus, they would feel special. They were insulted (at the PTA meeting)...I used the word “insulted” and she agreed with me that we had experts up there kind of proclaiming how things should be done rather than listening to the people about their own expertise and she said, “I’m a good parent and ‘this person’ is a good parent. .” So I hope that I expressed to her our strong desire to do a better job of that – a better job of communicating to people that we know they are good parents and I told her that I haven’t met a parent yet that didn’t love their child. .and that we know we have not always done a good job of giving parents the message that we want to. Sometimes we get in a hurry or whatever...and I asked her if I could call her and ask...I used the words “We’re looking for some parents to kind of be leaders in this.” And that didn’t hit her quite right because she considered for a moment and she said, “I don’t think it’s so much about having leaders as it is just listening to parents and finding out what they want and need.” She said, “Okay.”...I asked her if I could call her and I told her I’d like her to call me if she had opinions about things so we could listen and do a better job. I really feel like I connected there (J, 12/18).

“Parents as Partners. Now what does *that* mean?” Peggy’s words have come to represent something important in the development of the project. She gave voice that day to much of what is missing in our attempts at partnership. We often speak the language, but do not then treat parents as true partners, but instead as other students who need educating. Surely, we may have information and wisdom to share with parents at times, but so will they have information and wisdom to share with us.

This second Santa Visit is where PAC began to grow. After the holiday, I called upon Peggy to continue this conversation. Since then, she has enlisted her friend, Holly, into our Parent Advisory Committee. In that sense, we gained that day not only a positive experience for the children (and, we hope, a positive view of the school in the eyes of parents), but also some most valuable input and leadership (even if Peggy would prefer not to call it that!) from parents in our priority neighborhood.

A Place For Parents

“We also recommend that each Basic School have a parent place, a comfortable location in the building where parents gather throughout the day and mingle, informally, with staff or other parents” (Boyer, p. 58).

Boyer’s suggestion for creating a special place for parents was discussed at length early in the process of the SaC Family. When Kizer first opened four years ago, there was a resource room for parents located near the front office. That room was quickly consumed by other more pressing needs. This space had been designated without a clear purpose. It had been used by the PTA as a workroom and storage space. Both of these purposes were satisfied fairly easily in other areas of the building (FR 7/15).

The SaC Family continued to grapple in early meetings with how and where to establish such a center that could welcome and include parents actively in the education of their children by giving them a special place to call their own. Even before the grant funding came through, SaC Family members were actively pursuing conversations about the location of a parent room and what to include therein. After much discussion, it was decided finally that the old teachers’ dining room adjacent to the cafeteria would be the perfect location. It is easily accessible when parents come to school for programs or to have lunch with their children. Until recently, however, the space was filled with items stored there by the PTA. After several gentle discussions in which Mr. Walton and the teacher representatives to the PTA Board pursued the topic of cleaning out this storage room for more active use, the Board members scheduled a Saturday morning to accomplish the task. Both teachers and principal were cognizant of the difficulty of displacing the PTA once again, but we were hopeful that this group would see that their goals and the goals of the Parent Place could be one and the same (FR, 9/10; SaC, 9/17; SaC, 10/22). In fact, this proposal seemed to be received very positively. I joined the parents that gathered that morning to clean the space. Items that had been stored there seemed to find a home

in other parts of the building with little difficulty. Some items such as books, small games, and toys were left there because they could easily be used in the new Parent Place (J, 11/21).

Calls for furnishings and used books have been fruitful. A carpet, couch, lamp, computer desk, and side table have been supplied by Kizer parents and staff along with decorative art work for the walls provided by students. We hope to have the computer that was generously supplied by one of our university connections on KCCT, connected to the Internet very soon. While we await the brochures, books, and shelving that we hope will be forthcoming, the room has been getting slow, but steady use according to the parent guest book that is displayed prominently on the table. We hope to add videos of interest to parents along with a TV/VCR combination that could be used to view them on site. We are currently looking for donations of more toys and games of interest to preschoolers to add to those already provided by Peggy and Holly. Recent PAC meetings have led to preliminary discussions and plans for a parent discussion group that will be conducted informally *for* parents *by* parents in the center (J, 2/18).

Peggy and Holly have made it clear that they feel more comfortable when the people who advise them are parents themselves. Both agree that often school people and authors write and speak from the perspective of "expert." This seems to insult these women who learn best from their own experience and the experiences of those with whom they can personally relate. They suggested the publication of a "parent to parent" newsletter where parents could write about their experiences in parenting that may be helpful to other families. Parents might also write letters requesting input from others in an "advice column" with many authors and respondents. Peggy and Holly have both suggested these ideas and expressed a willingness to provide the leadership to get them off the ground (J, 1/21; J, 1/28).

High Mountain Night

Early in the project ARGA wrote a transportation fund into the budget of the Parents as Partners grant proposal (ARGA, 9/23). The newly established Parent Advisory Committee (Holly and Peggy) agreed that we could reach out to Forest Mountain families and, perhaps more

successfully, involve them in the life of the school if we could provide transportation to PTA programs and school events. Briarwood parents without automobiles can easily walk to the school or take public transportation. Forest Mountain families do not have the luxury of these possibilities. By running a school bus through the area for special events, we could be sure that families would not be prevented from attendance by lack of transportation (J, 1/21).

Our first attempt at family transportation took place on February 3, the night that we called “High Mountain Night” in honor of our special guests from the University. This PTA-sponsored event brought representative athletes from all of the various sports along with the pep band, cheerleaders, dancers, and prizes. Pizza, drinks, and desserts were sold, but the project covered the cost of food for a few children who arrived without funds. The evening was a lot of fun, but we were a bit disappointed that only one parent actually rode the bus along with us. That parent was our ever-loyal PAC member, Peggy Gray. The notice that was sent home specified that children should be accompanied by an adult, but when one child from Forest Mountain I showed up at the bus stop with only her middle-school brother and the other ten children from Forest Mountain II were traveling with one beleaguered parent, we could not bring ourselves to send any of them home (J, 2/3).

In the end we were glad we did not send them away. Peggy ably supervised the masses with a “camp counselor” demeanor. Holly also brought a carload of children from Forest Mountain to the event in her own car. She and Peggy later advised me to send very positive follow-up notes to parents after the event; both those who rode the bus and those that did not. At their suggestion we expressed gratitude for the children that joined us that evening, complimented their behavior, and simply informed parents of upcoming opportunities for transportation to school events in the evening and on Saturdays. We included a simple invitation for parents to join us whenever possible.

Cautions

Peggy and Holly have shared their own experiences with trying to enlist the help of parents from their neighborhood. They seem to have some definite ideas about what will and will not work. Holly called parents before High Mountain Night to invite participation and offered to take their children with her when they declined her invitation. Many of them accepted her offer. Still, it is unclear to me as yet how these two women are viewed within the trailer court. There is something that cautions me against mentioning their names when I am trying to gain other parental input. Holly has even hinted at some disagreements with other mothers from her neighborhood. This issue reminds me that personality and communication problems arise *within* as well as *among* communities. As we progress, we will need to make certain that we do not create yet another closed and exclusive group but one that welcomes all potential members of the learning community for the benefit of all the children who belong there.

One of my own goals for the project would be to get these two groups, PTA and PAC, operating symbiotically within the school community. At one point, I pondered how to gain representation from Forest Mountain on the PTA Board for the next school year. A recent episode leads me to fear that this goal may be unrealistic, at least for the very near future. The conversation at one of our Wednesday morning coffees somehow led to a laugh between Peggy and Holly about the PTA that seemed to indicate some negative connotations regarding the activities and membership of that group. It seems that, here again, there is a chasm that represents an “unnecessary war” (Goldstein, et. al., 1991). Not only are there gulfs between teachers and parents in this community, there is perhaps a bigger gulf between the parents of the “haves” who are widely represented in the PTA and the “have nots” who are represented currently by only a couple of parents on a Parent Advisory Committee. Philipsen (1996) provides evidence in a qualitative study that this issue is alive in other locations as well. That report documents concerns of parents that are alienated by the other parents who try to control school situations inappropriately. We must remember that “relations and tensions within the parent community” also “shape parent involvement” in a given school (Philipsen, 1996, p. 13).

Resources

Nevertheless, in the endeavor to create school community that meaningfully involves parents, the most important resource has been the time and ingenuity of parents themselves. It seems that when parents become positively involved, they are likely to talk with their friends and to invite them into the process. That is exactly what happened with Peggy and Holly. These two women have been our greatest PAC resource to date. They eagerly share ideas and materials and enthusiastically advocate for the project while suggesting names of other parents that I might contact to encourage participation.

The PTA has provided a mainstream parent perspective that must be considered. It is essential that we not alienate our already active population in attempting to involve those that have been more reticent to participate in the life of the school. Currently, the PTA Board has offered its philosophical support of the project and a willingness to consider the possibility of supporting it more concretely in the future. The prospect of creating partnerships between parents has also been discussed. We might be able to connect those who need transportation and school mentors with parents who are already comfortable and familiar with the system at school. We are hoping that this buddy system may develop over time to support Project SHARE for all of the interested Kizer community. That program has no financial requirements and is widely supported elsewhere in the community by families from all socioeconomic categories (PTA Board notes, 2/5).

Future

The interest surveys for Project SHARE will determine if we pursue this food cooperative any further. Thus far, it seems that we may have enough curiosity about the project to start on a tentative basis with substantial help from our university-student group discussed in the next chapter.

A school bus has been reserved to provide family transportation to all remaining PTA events and an event planned by the local education association called "Read to Kids Day." We will plan several stops within the two trailer parks next time to encourage more participation and safety after dark. It is our hope, that we will have greater parent participation as time goes on and families become more comfortable with the idea of riding together in a large group. There will be an academic fair at the school in March followed by a craft show and Brunswick stew sale in April and a talent show and spaghetti supper in May. We will encourage and welcome parent involvement in each of these events and think about ways to cover the cost for participants where needed.

In my role as HSC, I will follow the letters that have been sent to invite membership on PAC with phone calls in the next couple of weeks. At the suggestion of our current PAC, the next traveling party will be an Easter event. Once again, a school bus will take us to the two trailer communities in our priority neighborhood on consecutive days after school. This time, Peggy will be the Easter Bunny. The costume is already on reserve and plans are being made for story time, egg hunts, and games. We hope that our growing Parent Advisory Committee will work together with the graduate students from High Mountain to make this next event a big success.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Group 6: High Mountain University Graduate Students

Youthful Energy Helps It Happen

We further recommend that every Basic School, to enrich its staff development program, establish a formal partnership with a higher learning institution in the region. A college or university can, without question, be a vital resource to the school, with faculty acting as consultants, and with college students serving as interns at the school....

(Boyer, 1995, p. 44-45)

Leadership

In early December Dr. Loveland, a professor in the Teaching and Learning Department at High Mountain University, approached Mr. Walton with a request to involve a group of graduate students in a project to enhance their development as future educators. These students were ready for a field study experience, but not yet prepared for full-fledged student teaching. Dr. Loveland was interested in a project that would substantially engage the students in an area of importance while giving them exposure to a school environment early in their Masters degree program. Mr. Walton suggested the Parents as Partners project along with one other initiative new to the school. We met with Dr. Loveland in December and again in early January to describe the two projects and to work together to develop ways that the students could enhance and benefit from the goals of the initiatives while addressing their own needs for learning.

I was enthusiastic about the possibilities not only because of my tremendous need for assistance in order to make the project a success, but also my concern that preservice teachers are in need of instruction and experience in effective ways to involve parents in the education of

their children. A major challenge facing our teacher education institutions today is how to ready future teachers for the parent involvement that is being heralded as an essential prerequisite of school reform.

Within a few days of the planning meeting with Dr. Loveland, we met with the thirteen students that she was charged with assigning to a field study. Special Education Teacher Cary Price and I each described our projects to the group. Students volunteered for the program that interested them most. Six of these students opted to work with the Parents as Partners project. That day we decided to meet each Tuesday morning to determine needs, disperse responsibilities, and report progress. The initiative and leadership of this group of graduate students are truly responsible for much of the progress of the project in the last two months. The time that they have invested in the program, including readying the Parent Place and promoting its grand opening at High Mountain Night at the school, have been a tremendous help.

Goals

In addition to the PTA-planned events at High Mountain Night, this group inflated and distributed helium balloons in the university colors, rode the school bus with me through the Forest Mountain community gathering and greeting children, and watched over these children during the festivities in the absence of substantial parental supervision. Two months into this partnership, the project is proceeding much more quickly than would have been possible without the help of this energetic group.

When schools and universities develop genuine partnerships, not only does the school benefit in terms of inexpensive labor to accomplish their educational goals, they assist the university in adequately preparing teachers for the changing environment of schooling. Teachers come into the profession better prepared and ready to become active participants in the leadership of their schools. If parents are to be partners in education, teachers must be ready to act as a part of the team. My goal in working with this group has been twofold: 1) to get the Parents as

Partners project up and running and 2) to add an important component to the education of these teachers of tomorrow. Teachers who learn to skillfully facilitate the triangular relationship between the child, the parent, and themselves will be much better prepared to guide the learning of their students in a manner that meets their individual needs.

Literature Support

Teacher practices can influence parent involvement greatly and teacher perceptions of such involvement greatly influence what they do to encourage it (Epstein, 1983). Few teacher education institutions have traditionally included training in parent involvement as part of their programs (Weiss, 1996). As a result many teachers lack the skills and attitudes necessary to involve parents successfully (Morris et al., 1996). Recommendations to remedy this situation and prepare teachers to connect with families and communities include: 1) requiring course work on the topic of family involvement in education, 2) infusing parent involvement awareness into all teacher preparation courses (Morris et al., 1996), 3) providing pre-service teachers with opportunities for direct contact with families and communities (Weiss, 1996), and 4) preparing administrators to support teachers in their parent involvement efforts (Epstein, 1987).

New Skills for New Schools: Preparing Teachers in Family Involvement (Shartrand, et al., 1997) reports on the current state of teacher preparation and readiness for including parents. This recent document blames inconsistency in teacher certification requirements across the country for serious omissions from education programs. The publication asserts that political pressure to remedy this situation and preparation for change in schools, including parent involvement, are among the responsibilities of universities and colleges who train potential educators. These perspectives from the scholarly community helped to ease my conscience greatly as I put this team of future educators vigorously to work on the tasks needed to make Parents as Partners a success at Kizer.

Activities and Resources

The High Mountain Graduate Student (HMGS) group is a substantial resource for the program in and of itself. These six students have worked independently and in small groups to accomplish a great deal in a very short period of time. Many of the projects and tasks that have evolved out of the ideas and plans of the other five groups have fallen to this group for implementation. In our weekly planning sessions together, I have shared the progress and suggestions of ARGA, KCCT, PAC and the SaC Family with these students. From there, HMGS has taken over.

They have put the finishing touches on the program brochure and guided its publication and distribution. After collecting art work from teachers and enlisting the help of children in preparing a banner, they created a flyer to advertise the Parent Place throughout the building. They have moved furniture and suggested decorative and functional touches for the room including a bulletin board, photo album, guest book, and suggestion box. One student organized a book drive to collect materials for both children and adults for the Parent Place. Another has worked with the transportation department to schedule busses for our outreach activities and solicited donations from local businesses for bookshelves for the room and materials for High Mountain Night at the school (HSC Daily Log).

After this event, three of these students worked on drafting and sending the follow-up letters on my behalf that also informed children and their families about upcoming opportunities at school that include transportation. One of those opportunities is the “Read to Kids Night” scheduled for March 2. HMGS students have worked with teachers to plan, organize, and schedule this event with very little input from me. The group has prepared surveys for potential participation in Project SHARE and taken responsibility for gathering them, making contact with the SHARE coordinator, and scheduling a training session for interested parents and teachers (HSC Daily Log).

These activities have freed my time on the job for work with individual students and families and interactions with the other five groups engaged in the process. It is our hope that engagement in this process has also served the students as a resource for their own learning through reflective involvement in the thought processes and efforts that go into any new initiative in a school. Each week we review our experiences and progress, ask for help where it is needed, and think together about the next action steps that will make the goals of the project into a reality.

Cautions

The first day that I met with this group of graduate students, I became a bit uncomfortable when I realized that I had been granted my wish for much more than superficial involvement in the process. I had told them that I wanted not only their hard work, but engagement of their brains in the process. They were full of ideas and suggestions about ways to involve the students and new initiatives with community resources. I literally had to take a deep breath and do my best to slow the process (and their enthusiasm) down a bit. When I was honest, I had to admit that I felt so much ownership of the project that I was not prepared for it to change directions in midstream. A lot of time and thought and energy had gone into what was already in the works and we needed some old fashioned elbow grease to get it going. I was not particularly open at that point to substantial change from the plans that had been slowly taking shape in the hands of the SaC Family, ARGA and KCCT. I was also in a hurry. We had been planning and thinking, but actually moving very slowly. I wanted to see some *action*. I found myself needing to echo many of the same cautions that had been bestowed upon me in the work of the other groups (J, 1/20).

From the beginning this group has encouraged us to think of ways to involve kids in the project, believing naturally that involving children will be the key to involving parents. While this is certainly true, we have yet to discover any comfortable way to do this on an individual basis. One member of HMGS asked if we could identify the priority students and involve them more directly in readying the Parent Place for parent use. I had to discourage this strategy simply

because our priority list is not an official document. Despite our care in its development, it was not intended to label students for any special program. Instead it was created only to make us all aware of needs, to establish a protocol of communication and eventually to report progress for evaluation of the grant program with hopes of further funding.

I have attempted to share regularly with the group about my most current experiences in working with individual families, but thus far I have not found much opportunity to involve these students directly in this work. One student has accompanied me twice in my visits to one home and assisted in my thinking about the goals for the visit before we got there and how well we did at accomplishing those goals as we left. That same student has offered to act as a mentor to the child of the mother that we visited at home, but has not yet been encouraged to do so by the classroom teacher. I am hesitant to push these kinds of relationships because of the short time that these students will be with us. As a short-term member of the Kizer faculty myself, I constantly struggle with how to be the bridge that facilitates more effective communication between teacher and parent without becoming an interloper in the process. We very much want to give these students direct contact with families. This will be an important part of their education. Relationship building, however, is tenuous business. We do not want to give families the impression that they are being passed around to build *substitute relationships* (HSC Daily Log).

Since that first day, things have settled down for all of us. We have been able to create a rhythm for communication and action. We will continue, however, to wrestle with the difficult confrontations between our ideals and the realities of the current interactions within the school.

Future

One possibility for addressing the needs of the project and the needs of the students in the short term is likely to arise in the form of interactions between this group of graduate students and our Parent Advisory Committee. PAC is necessarily gaining appropriate ownership for many of the upcoming plans for the project including the parent-to-parent newsletter, informal parenting discussion groups, and spring outreach to the target communities. They have shared their ideals for such projects and seem ready to welcome some help in making them happen. At the same time, HMGS seems ready to offer this assistance. It is my hope that the two groups will soon be meeting together and interacting.

Beyond this school year, we are hoping that those who facilitate the project in the future will find ways to continue a partnership with the university that includes students actively in the process. Their energy has been vital to the progress that has been made. More importantly though, such a partnership will encourage the participation of field study students who will gain much from being asked to think about their preparedness for involving families before they become entrenched in the business of day-to-day teaching. When university faculty join in the discussion on the project occasionally as Dr. Loveland has done, there is an added degree of obligation to keep the process thoughtful and reflective as well as productive. This, I believe, has added greatly to our ability to maintain a critical perspective on our work together and to develop the reflective practice of future teachers.

CHAPTER NINE

Early Lessons from Critical Beginnings

The message is clear. It is simply impossible to have an island of excellence in a sea of community indifference, and when parents become school partners, the results can be consequential and enduring.

(Boyer, 1995, p. 61)

Summary

As it now stands, the Parents as Partners project is a fledgling initiative guided by the developing thoughts, ideas, and efforts of six active groups comprised of parents, teachers, students, and community members interested in creating a thriving community for the support of children's learning. The initiative functions on three levels: 1) school-wide components intended to involve all Kizer parents in the education of their children, 2) a priority neighborhood emphasis that attempts to actively facilitate the involvement of parents from the Forest Mountain community specifically, and 3) a priority student effort that places a premium on early intervention for individual needs as they arise. As Figure 9-1 illustrates, the conceptualization of the project has developed one step further to demonstrate our latest understanding that the project's emphases are on efforts that support both literacy and health in the children who attend Kizer. Ernest Boyer would agree that it is difficult to have literacy without health. We, in turn, agree with Boyer that involvement of parents in the school community will be critical to the attainment of both. In the role of the home-school coordinator, I attempt to support the efforts of the program on all three levels, knowing that it will take time to establish the project as a part of the school's daily operational and philosophical systems.

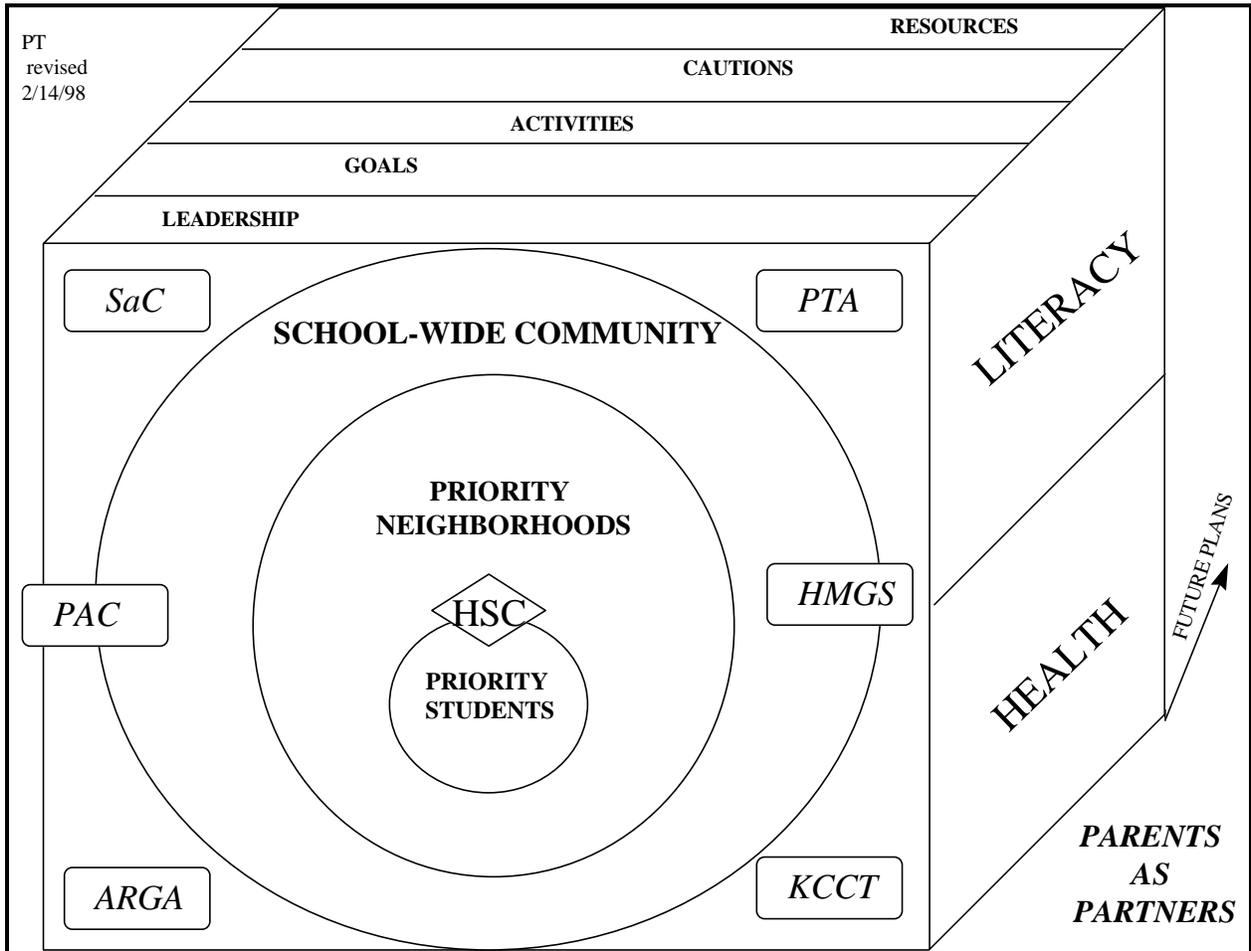


Figure 9-1 Conceptualizing Parents as Partners III

Lingering Question

Despite its name, the School as Community Family has spent very little time together since their initial gathering discussing the term *community* and what it means to create community in schools. At least one family member seems to be longing for an opportunity to do so on an intellectual level. Special Education Consulting Teacher Cary Price expressed her musings on the subject this way:

To give our committee, the community committee, a sense of something to really tussle with instead of just some cool projects to do would be “What does it mean to us as a building...?” Our committee, I don’t think any of us feel like we have the power to say that for the whole building that we get to define what it ought to look like, but if the school defines what do we mean by being a community school? What should that look like? And what is our fundamental value going to be? And we all agree on this, right? And some of it’s not going to feel comfortable sometimes, but we’re going to try this. Then that gives our committee something to do. Where do we start and how do we *model* what we’re talking about? ...Here are some things we can do in the building, but how do we model between ourselves the kind of interactions that we are asking people to have? What can we do with our kids together? What can we do with the parents in our classes? If we’re this committee, we’re supposed to be struggling with this issue. We need to set up school things, but we also need to work on ourselves individually and see, “Can we create this within our family?” “Can we model this for everyone?” . . .(CP, 11/13, lines 244-260)

Cary voices the essential question that to-date has not been significantly approached by the School as Community Family:

“What do we mean by community school?”

(CP, 11/13, line 290)

Though the SaC Family has not thoroughly addressed this issue, Cary is wrestling with it regularly.

It has another two levels; one of them is set up opportunities in the building for us to all participate in things that help us think about this, like celebration – the first day of school – and going out to read at Forest Mountain. But the second thing we want you to do is model it in your interactions with each other and with your children. So we want to try to...we want to set up opportunities to practice and we want to set up models of people that *live it every day* ...(CP, 11/13/ line 304-311).

Perhaps this “tussling” is in the SaC Family’s future. It has been a part of my daily life since this conversation with Cary in early November, 1997. It reminds us that perhaps creating school community is not quite so “concrete” after all (See GO quotation, p.55).

Interpretations

Our dilemma is that schools are both active and abstract places. Sometimes the activity of school overshadows our need for the philosophy of school. In my role as participant researcher I have had the luxury of time for reflection and the inclination toward constructing models to visually interpret each new development of the inquiry. These models may serve as mechanisms for creating meaning out of the work that we have done together in the Parents as Partners project.

Figure 9-2 illustrates a current understanding of school community development. Unlike the other conceptual models created in the experience, this latest illustration depicts a philosophical orientation for the project in terms of ecological and critical theories. It could also assist us in striking a balance between the actions taken and the theoretical foundations of our research.

**A CRITICAL-ECOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE
ON CREATING SCHOOL COMMUNITY**

PT 2/18/98

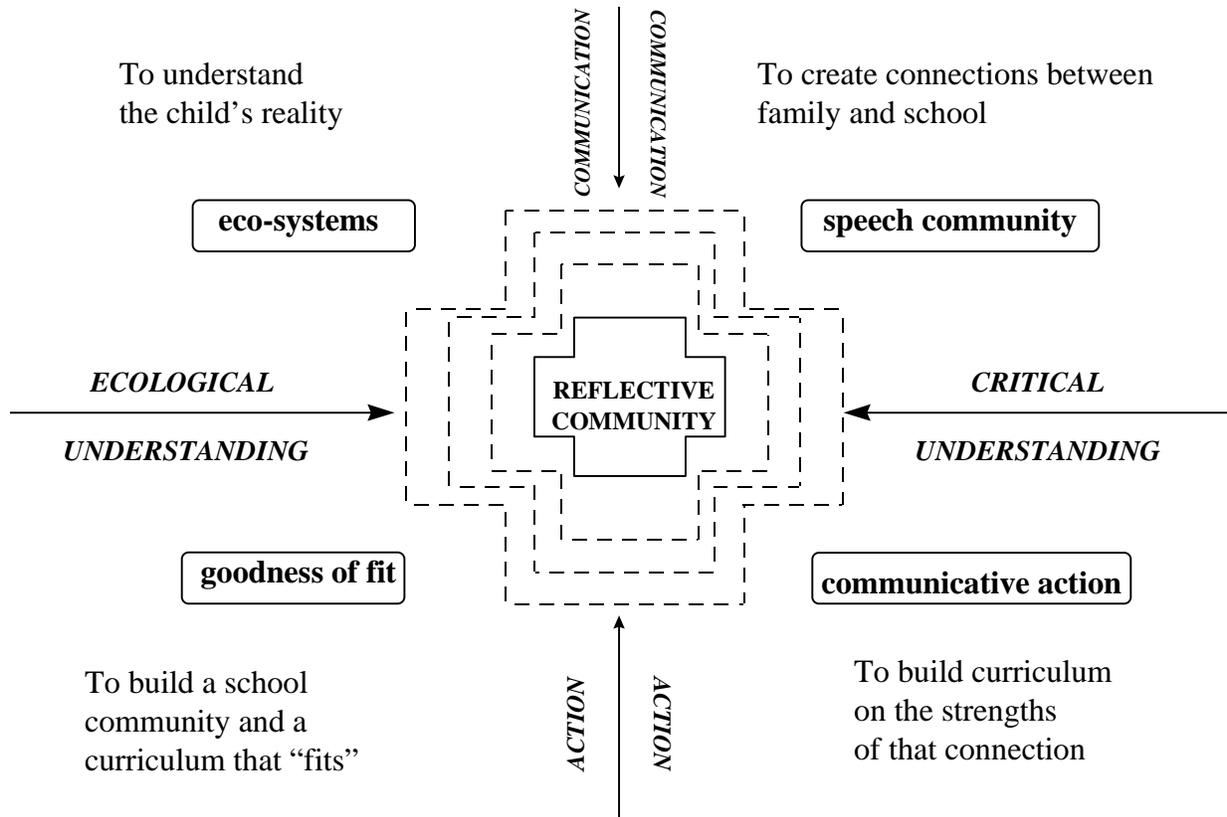


Figure 9-2 A Critical-Ecological Perspective on Creating School Community

I envisioned an early version of this diagram while struggling particularly with the issues related to the justification of home visits pondered in Chapter 5. Since then, the fusion of critical and ecological theories has seemed to apply well to the school community issue as a whole. I have come to identify my interpretation as *a critical-ecological perspective* simply because it takes these two theories into account and demonstrates how the two complement one another. The model provides a multidimensional rationale for the methods we are trying to practice for creating school community at Kizer.

Neither of these perspectives seems satisfactory in and of itself. If we take the ecological theory that suggests that we attempt to understand the multiple systems that influence the life of the child, we must look closely at the child's reality including his home environment. At times, this might involve a visit to the child's home. If our response to what we find there is to build a school and a curriculum that fit the needs of the child, then we have justified our probing. If, on the other hand, we do it simply to grasp the hardships in the lives of our students, then our motives become merely voyeuristic. When we simultaneously work to build the genuine, authentic "speech community" originated in Habermus's critical theory, we do it for the purpose of building bridges between the system of the home and the system of the school so that learning may be enriched and encouraged by the link. Speech community denotes conversation to build alliances. Both theories, when viewed this way, promote communication and understanding followed by action. Our ever-imperfect actions demand that we must continue to communicate and act in an endless circuit of communicative action hoping that we will come closer in each cycle to the ideal community for learning that we seek.

I fear that Swepson (1998) would accuse me here of falling into the *idealist trap* by pretending that the ideal speech situation for growing community is attainable in this material world. Yet, I believe that we have succeeded in meeting her criteria for escaping the trap by:

keep(ing) the vision and values of action research separate from their methodologies in order to fully develop both...The vision is not a description of reality, and the two sets of plans are different but in a dialogue with each other. In research, the vision could be

for emancipation or objective knowledge but needs to have a well spelt out operational plan or methodology to deal with the contingencies of the local situation” (p. 5- 6).

The Parents as Partners project at its root is an operational plan, but from my vantage point, has much additional potential to serve as a medium for more philosophical thought and reflection about what we mean by community school.

Critical-Ecology and Kizer Elementary School

Remember, school community is that fellowship of human beings where the common interest that they share is an interest in learning (see discussion, p.14). One central premise of this evolving model (Figure 9-2) is that we cannot claim to create school community without simultaneously creating a reflective community that constantly interacts, questions and participates with us while inviting others into our midst. To create school community is to grow a space of reflective kinship where children and adults can learn together. It will never be complete until it is inclusive of all rightful members. At Kizer that means including the parents of students who live in Forest Mountain as well as those who live in Briarwood in both the conversation and the activity.

Communication and action are the essential ingredients of communities for learning. We can understand communicative action from a perspective of ecological theory that assumes a need for communication toward an understanding that informs changes within the school so that it can fit the needs of students. We have accomplished this ideal only occasionally at Kizer by allowing students to complete homework at school when we discover that there simply is no table space for a study corner at home or when we provide the scissors, markers, and tape that may make a homework assignment doable. Helping to meet a child’s basic needs for food, clothing, rest or medical care may be viewed as a “fitting” response to a child’s ecological reality. Kizer’s second annual faculty auction that provides a children’s fund to meet such needs is a step in this direction.

Naturally, communicative action may be understood also from a perspective of the critical theory from which the concept originated. School community requires genuine communication and empowerment of individuals and groups within the system to make changes and contributions that will enrich the learning experience. Peggy is one of a handful of parents that are beginning to respond to our invitations for genuine conversation regarding the future of parent partnerships at Kizer. This reflective community is only beginning to take root and grow, but we know that we will create a school community one communicative action step (and one relationship) at a time.

Implications

For Kizer

It is my hope that the case study of the early development of the Parents as Partners project will help the participants to see concretely something that is not at all concrete in actuality. The road toward school community appears nebulous and philosophical. This can be an uncomfortable, and sometimes irrelevant, realm for teachers and parents. If we are able to visualize a process for the journey, then perhaps we will be able to move forward on some tangible action steps that will get us to our destination. Once we can conceive it, we will be better prepared to act upon it. The Parents as Partners project at Kizer has the potential for being a tool which members of the current community can use to think critically together and to work toward ongoing creation and growth. Beyond this, it is my hope that these concentrated efforts to thoroughly describe and interpret the needs for community growth at Kizer will assist that school in obtaining the financial support that it will require to continue those efforts to bring parents into the school as full participating partners.

For Others

I believe that this study produces practical implications for schools wishing to begin the steps toward increasing the level of family engagement with student learning. If indeed schools can learn to build, support and sustain relationships with parents, then they might expect a greater level of success in educating their children. Schools elsewhere who hope to strengthen their own communities may find some guidance in the early phases of Kizer's story. The structure that evolved for us is evidence of the complex interconnections of groups and individuals that often are needed to initiate change. We have learned that it is essential to include parents in the conversations and decisions that will affect them, yet we have also learned how difficult it is to do so. Before we ask too much and frighten potential participants away, we must take the time to build the relationships that will allow us a welcome approach.

This study lends support to the work of those researchers and educators who remind us that the process of building communities that involve all parents and children of a school requires deliberate thought and incremental steps. No two plans for parent partnership will ever look alike because of the idiosyncratic individuals that comprise each complex system. Interested schools will find here only one example of how one school has begun. That example may be useful mostly by virtue of its cautions and limitations, but the actions taken could provide some additional inspiration and motivation for those wondering where to begin.

Recommendations

1. *Stay the course.*

The project is just getting off the ground. It is essential that the six groups (The School as Community Family, The At-risk Grant Advisory, The Kizer Comprehensive Community Team, The PTA Board, The Parent Advisory Committee, and the High Mountain Graduate Field Study

Students) continue down the path that has been laid if the Parents as Partners project is to hope to make a difference in the lives of the children at Kizer.

2. Seek funding to support paid leadership for the project.

If the community at Kizer is to continue to take gentle steps toward progress and growth, it will require leadership to do so. Certainly each group involved in the process has been brimming with leaders who have ideals and visions for the project. It will require one or two individuals to step forward to take on a unique leadership role if it is to continue to make discernible progress. An individual coordinator will be essential to manage the project components and the communication among groups so that the efforts do not become bogged down in the complexity of an expanding system. One important next step in the process will be to seek funding that can support employment of such an individual to direct the efforts of the school-wide components and neighborhood focus. At the same time, this individual must carry out the priority student initiative by making phone calls, providing transportation, conducting home visits, and supporting teachers in their own efforts at effective parent communication.

3. Support continued study of the progress of the Parents as Partners Project

This inquiry has been set deliberately within certain time constraints. It was planned from the outset that the study would cover the actions and initial steps taken by one group of teachers as they attempted to address the issue of school as community. As was expected, the number of participants in the study changed as the process unfolded and expanded to include many other groups involved in the project. A continuing study of this process would contribute further to the body of knowledge regarding steps that can be taken to involve families in their children's learning. Following this process further would surely provide greater insight into what steps are most successful in growing the learning community at one school.

4. Document strategies and outcomes and fine tune the program so that other schools may use it as a model for developing parent partnerships of their own.

The school system will require a formal evaluation of the project at year's end. In the original proposal (see Appendix I), we suggested a plan for evaluation to include any effects of the project on student attendance at school and parental attendance at school functions, as well as anecdotes by teachers and parents. At this writing, it is my belief that we must also include evidence of the specific activities undertaken to encourage the growth of the participating school community. Though Kizer Elementary has a significant proportion of children at-risk, other area schoolchildren could also benefit greatly through the implementation of efforts to more effectively involve their parents. Even locally, three other schools within the town of Brighton struggle regularly with how to serve the diverse population in this university community where individual needs and life goals seem to differ substantially. It would be my hope that our documentation and evaluation procedures would serve not only to continue support for the project at Kizer, but to model the possibilities for parent partnerships throughout the county and beyond.

5. Continue to involve university affiliates in the process.

The experience has caused me to wonder about the ability of a busy system to slow itself long enough to ponder the meaning of its work and interactions. University-affiliated faculty and students could provide a valuable resource to allow this to happen while contributing greatly to the growth and development of future educators. If reflection is a critical component of sustainable change, then those involved with this project will continue to have a need for opportunities to think and talk together about what it means to create community in schools. A researcher-participant in the process would seem to support the possibility for reflection by virtue of the university's need for thoughtful places of inquiry. Researchers who share an interest in the process and an inclination toward inquiry could help to keep the reflective community alive and growing.

6. Pursue guidance from other disciplines to avoid common pitfalls.

The progress of the project will require constant attention to personal motives and goals. Critical theory emphasizes empowerment of the individual to take action. Helping professionals struggle frequently with how to ascertain that their actions empower their clients but do not enable dependency. Empowerment assists individuals in taking responsibility for themselves and taking action to improve their situation. Mental health professionals speak of enabling behaviors as those which indirectly encourage dependency by allowing, and even encouraging, neediness. While we strive to provide the supports that make home-school communication possible, we must guard against supporting unnecessary dependence that moves us beyond the role of school and takes on the responsibilities of individual families. We must stand ready to “meet them more than halfway” (KCCT 11/14). Yet the line between support and enabling dysfunction can be a narrow one. It would be wise for those concerned with building school community and parent-teacher relationships to look to literature on empowerment theory, capacity building, and solution-focused counseling for wisdom as to how to avoid this dilemma as the project moves forward.

Conclusion

What does the future hold for the Parents as Partners project? Beyond the immediate plans of the interactive groups that have been followed through this case, I asked individuals in the School as Community Family at Kizer and a few of the members of ARGA to address that question.

I constructed a brief survey to determine the thinking of Kizer staff surrounding the future of the project. Six of the twelve surveys distributed were returned within a week. The survey responses (see Appendix M) were analyzed very simply by color coding common themes around the predictions and hopes of the respondents. The specific need for a home-school coordinator who could direct the efforts of the project was mentioned repeatedly. Most respondents believe

that without funding the project will dwindle in the hands of teachers who are unable to serve this function in addition to their full-time teaching duties. The guidance counselor suggested that hope might be found in the leadership of parents. One teacher mentioned the same kind of hope for the ability of faculty and staff to take over if indeed the program is well structured and running smoothly by the end of the 1997-98 school year.

My charge is clear. By the end of this school year, I must work with the guidance and support of the six groups involved with the project to actively plan for taking the Parents as Partners project forward into the future. We must aggressively seek funding sources to maintain the position of At-Risk Home-School Coordinator for Kizer. To do this, it will be important to keep detailed records of each reflective action step and outcome. In the meantime, we must continue to pursue a clear structure and vision for the project that will allow whoever is responsible for its continued implementation to do so with the help and support of those who envisioned it.

No school can afford to look away sadly from twenty percent of its population. A commitment to family involvement must mean a dedication to the ideal of inclusion for *all* families as well as *all* children. Kizer has modeled this principle well for itself with special education students. This does not mean that all families must take leave from work to volunteer at school. It means instead that schools must make it their business to make welcome those who come and to make it easier and more comfortable for them to do so. When they cannot or will not come, school must be willing to think diligently about how to reach out to them on their home turf instead. Their children's educational success may depend on it.

Exciting things are beginning to happen at Kizer Elementary. Out of an interest in Ernest Boyer's *The Basic School: A Community for Learning* (1995) has grown a flurry of energy directed toward building an initiative for outreach to parents who have not been a part of the school's community. The professionals at Kizer clearly have a desire to make a difference in the lives of their neediest students. They are wisely cautious about taking on too much too soon, but the seeds have been planted for some initial steps toward creating a school community that

includes the families that live in Forest Mountain. If we can do that, maybe Mary and Mark will have a slightly better chance in a world full of Matthews and Marisas.

Reflections

The process of inquiry described here has taught me much about myself as a novice researcher. I now know that conceptual models contribute greatly to my learning and understanding about new ideas and new encounters with the world. Visual models are a tool that I will use many times in my future when I am seeking to comprehend complex phenomena that at first glance seem beyond my capabilities. Beyond this, I have discovered that research can be a highly personal and idiosyncratic process. No text seemed to provide a perfect prescription for analysis to fit my study. I gained confidence in my ability to discern appropriate strategies and to use those strategies to draw meaning from the data before me as I progressed.

One personal idiosyncrasy is a newfound attachment to a hand-held tape recorder. I found that oral journaling is a valuable tool that I will continue to use to process important events in my life even when I may not use the tapes for formal analysis. The method of talking aloud to myself provided much of what my written journals had done in the past without the constraints of sitting in a chair. I have always been a “self-talker”, but the recorder addresses the remote possibility that some of my fleeting thoughts might occasionally turn out to be significant. I will certainly not abandon the practice of written reflection, but oral journaling provides an additional avenue for personal and professional growth left unexplored until recently.

If I could do anything differently in this study, I would have begun by capturing the exact words of the meeting on June 13, 1997, that important first day in the work of the School as Community Family. There was such richness in the conversation that day. I am sure that by attempting to reconstruct it as I have, something has been missed.

One further regret is that I must stop studying the process while it is yet so young and untested. If I had the luxury of continuing as part-time employee and student-researcher, I would continue to follow the process through at least the first two years. There is so much more to

consider. New and interesting events worthy of reflection are happening everyday that could serve to further educate me in an area of unwavering interest since my years as a classroom teacher and an elementary guidance counselor.

Those fourteen years as an educator brought many occasions for uncomfortable encounters with parents who only wanted the best for their children. As the mother of two sons of my own, I discovered the discomfort of sitting on the other side of the table at a parent-teacher conference and leaving with still unresolved issues between us. These experiences created a longing to understand and correct the invisible wall that is often constructed between parents and school personnel. This research journey has brought me closer to understanding the monumental thought and action that must go into making that change.

Though there is much to be done, I believe that the beginnings of this journey have taught us some valuable lessons about the posture that must be assumed by schools if we are to hope to build communities that embrace all children and families and promote learning:

1. We must be *creative* enough to try new avenues for drawing people into the school.
2. We must be *energetic*. Community can only be built through both reflection and action.
3. We must be *persistent*. Those who have been alienated and disenfranchised will not come on the first invitation.
4. We must be *patient* and *respectful* in our overtures.
5. We must be *flexible* and adapt to the needs of parents just as we must adapt to the needs of children.
6. We must be *honest* about our own struggles at growth and human understanding.
7. We must *seek* the *input* and wisdom from the many resources available to us - most importantly the wisdom and input of the parents themselves.

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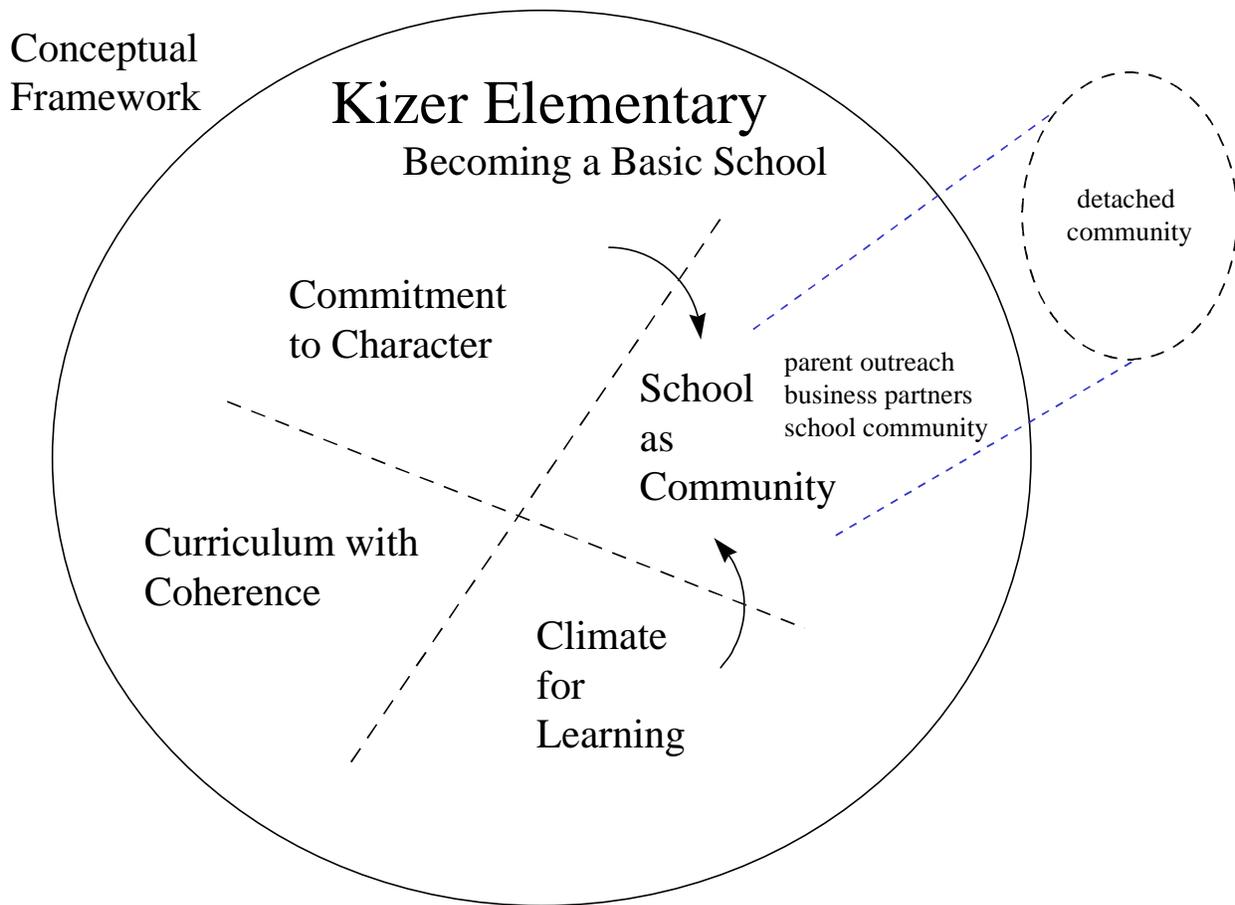
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APPENDICES

APPENDIX A

CONCEPTUAL PLACEMENT OF INQUIRY



APPENDIX C

INITIAL DATA CATEGORIES

Basic School	First Day Celebration
Research Process	ARGA
Systems Thinking	At-Risk
Recalling 6/13	Attendance
SaC	Transportation
Levels of support	Needs Assessment
Outreach	Outside Resources and Contributions
KCCT	Teachers - Parent
Communication	Parent Advisory
HSC - Home/School Coordinator	Parent Place
Teacher Preparation and Input	Future Funding
Leadership	Cautionary Messages
History	

APPENDIX D

SECONDARY CATEGORIES

INITIAL CATEGORY	ADDITIONAL SUBCATEGORIES OR ACTIONS
Basic School	Change
History	(Left this category general.)
Research Process	(Simply arranged chronologically.)
Systems Thinking	General, In-service, Interventions
Recalling 6/13	(Simply arranged chronologically.)
SaC	SaC General; The Concept/ Mission
First Day Celebration	Needs/ Activity/ Resources/ Cautions/ Emotions/ Feedback
ARGA	Establishment/Beginnings, Goals, Activities, Budget, Evaluation
At-Risk	Defining Priority Students, Building Priority Matrix, Intervention Planning
Attendance	Grant Focus, Defining Problem, Interventions/Letters, etc.
Transportation	Issues, Potential Solutions
Needs Assessment	Needs, Activity
Levels	Project Conceptualization (related to research process)
Outreach	Mission, Literacy, Teacher Affect, Bubbles, Santa Visits, Plans
KCCT	Organization, Goals, Action Ideas, Future Thinking, Linking to Project
Communication	(This category was consumed into the HSC category)
Teachers - Parent	H-V Rationale, HSC Role, Home Visits, Obstacles, Home Visits for Literacy, Respect/Trust
Teacher Preparation and Input	Predisposition, Training, Input
Parent Place	Function, Location, Publicity, Stuff, Interaction with Grant, Visiting others, Staffing, SCA, PTA
Parent Advisory	Goals, Needs, Importance, Process toward, Parent to Parent Sponsorship, Examples and Anecdotes
Cautionary Messages	Whole School, Priority Neighborhoods, Priority Students
Leadership	RW/PT/KD/AF
Outside Resources and Contributions	Whole School, Priority Neighborhoods, Priority Students
Future Funding	Whole School, Priority Neighborhoods, Priority Students
HSC - Home/School Coordinator	General, Self, Job Description/Hiring Process, Communication, Involving Teachers, Group Intervention

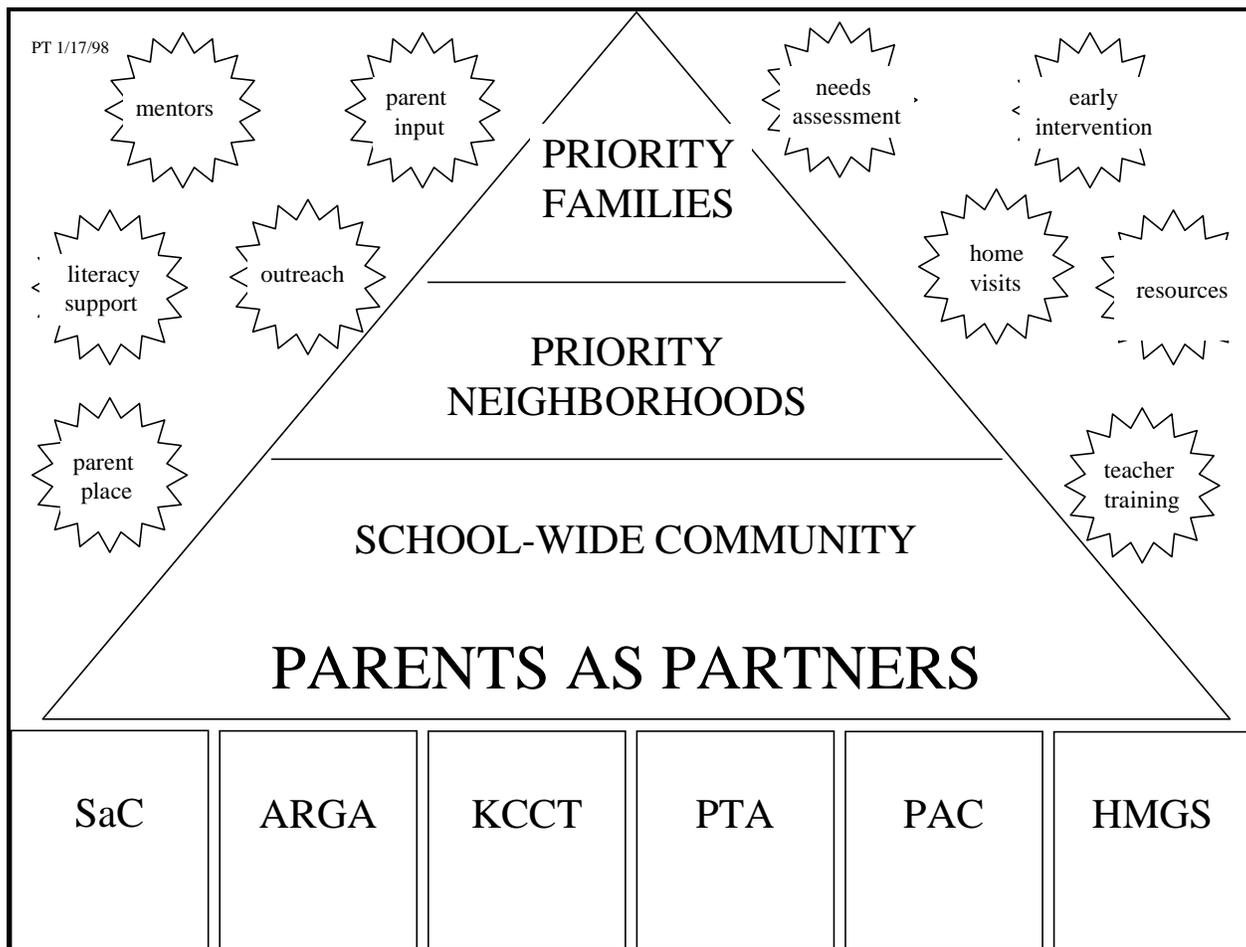
APPENDIX E

DATA ANALYSIS

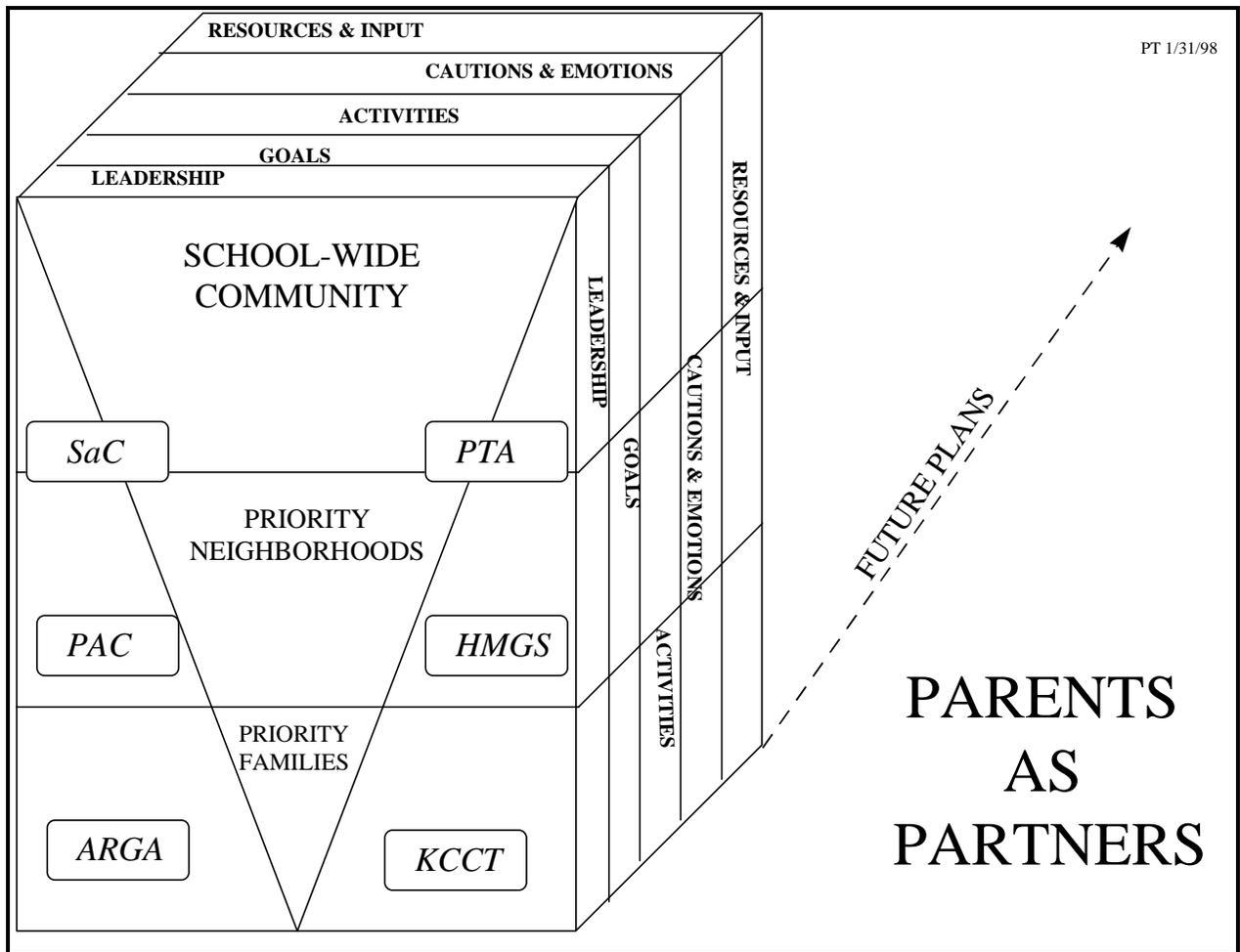
Passes through the data:

1. To listen and transcribe – some small preliminary analysis
2. To mark and unitize
3. To cut and sort
4. To re-sort within emergent categories
5. To spread out all groups to recombine like/similar themes (small folders)
6. Initial ordering within categories – thinking toward telling the story
7. To re-sort within subcategories and recategorize as needed (Visualize)
8. Adding cards pointing to documents in Blue File
9. Looking for “gold nuggets” in each category – essential elements
10. Filing remaining documents into accordion file; ordering and coding where it is necessary
11. Continuing analysis and negotiation of data during the writing process

APPENDIX F
FOUNDATIONS



APPENDIX G



APPENDIX H

FIRST DAY FEEDBACK

Event held August 25, 1997

Feedback sought September 3, 1997 at Faculty Meeting

Data compiled September 4, 1997 by P. Talbot

Total Respondents – 19

Approximately 105 afternoon participants – parents and volunteers – mostly parents.

Comments:

- Parents seemed very pleased! It really helped when we were loading kids on buses!
- It was a great way to begin the school year but a little “overwhelming” for Kindergartners!
- The project was too much for K. We needed more time and we had a hard time explaining what to do to kids who were coming to school for the first time.
- Morning thing was great for parents! Afternoon was ok - maybe better on 1st week Friday afternoon? Needed to be longer especially outside. We took a long time to get out there for a very few minutes.
- Enjoyed!
- I enjoyed it! I feel it helped the children that were hesitant in beginning of day to know Mom (or Dad) was coming back earlier.
- It went well with volunteer help.
- It was interesting.
- I wish more had taken place outside. It took a very few minutes outside and more getting lined up, going out and waiting for things to start.
- I liked the goals. Kids did well.
- It was nice having volunteers come in. There wasn't a lot for them to do. I wish there could have been more for them to do.
- I think everything was great although I was a little nervous about having parents in my room on the 1st day (and my 1st day!)
- Parent response was great! It looked like the Parents' “Welcome Breakfast” went well. (I could see them in the courtyard from my classroom.)
- I thought it was very positive. We need to celebrate our learning and the people we work with. We don't need to each bring in 2 dozen goodies – I think 1 doz. would do.
- Couple of my parents were frustrated because they also needed to go to another child's classroom.
- Nice experience! Parents seem to really enjoy it.
- May have been a little frustrating for beginning teachers (I was told this.)
- What a nice experience!
- I thought there would have been more participation by parents.
- I thought it went well!! Not too much and not too little.
- I was very pleased with the first day. It was the right amount of time and effort for the faculty. It went smoothly. I like the fact that parents were involved and children. The day went off very positively.

APPENDIX I

**Larson County Public Schools
Elementary At-risk Project
Grant Proposal**

Parents as Partners

Funding Request
\$10,000

**Submitted
on behalf of Kizer Elementary School**

by

Robert Walton, Principal

Amy Fulton, Guidance Counselor

Patricia Talbot, Administrative Intern

KES Faculty

October 6, 1997

Abstract

Parents as Partners

Poor school attendance, low standardized test scores, and limited parental involvement are characteristics descriptive of the substantial population of at-risk students at Kizer Elementary School. Despite the dedicated efforts of a caring staff to meet the needs of these students, the concerns persist. A tremendous frustration in dealing with these needs is the external perception that Kizer serves few at-risk students since the school is located within a prosperous university community. Schools within Larson County that have fewer students qualifying for free and reduced lunch receive services not available at Kizer because eligibility for these services is based on percentages rather than actual numbers of students in need. This project will address the needs of our sizeable at-risk student population by building enduring relationships with families and establishing a system of mutual support for academic progress and consistent school attendance. We will seek to increase overall attendance and engagement of the at-risk student population by identifying students who have a pattern of absenteeism and arranging early parent contacts to discuss obstacles to regular attendance, methods to surmount those obstacles, and a collaborative plan of improvement. We will develop a mechanism to stay abreast of attendance problems and an early response system to avert ongoing obstacles to regular presence at school. In addition, we will develop and implement strategies that will increase the involvement of the at-risk parent population at Kizer Elementary and work to improve service delivery to targeted families through open communication and collaborative community efforts.

To accomplish these goals, we will prepare school faculty through inservice training and site visits to schools with successful programs for involving the families of children at-risk . These experiences will prepare teachers to participate and to support the efforts of a part-time home-school coordinator who will facilitate connections between the families of students identified as at-risk and the Kizer school community. Using the framework of Boyer's *Basic School* (1995) as a starting point, a faculty team will work along with the home-school coordinator to identify and address barriers to parent involvement, provide relevant parent programs, establish a parent resource center, and provide transportation and child care that will enable parent participation in school-related activities.

It is anticipated that these efforts will significantly increase regular school attendance of identified at-risk pupils as well as involvement of their parents in the schooling process. Parent participation and elementary school attendance have been shown to be significant factors in decreasing dropout rates and increasing academic success over time. This pilot project will include efforts to sustain these initiatives and to seek external funding sources to maintain the program after the initial funds are no longer available.

Purpose of the Grant

The purpose of this project will be to address the needs of the at-risk student population at Kizer Elementary School by building enduring relationships with their families and establishing a system of mutual support for academic progress and consistent school attendance early in their school careers.

Statement of Need

Kizer Elementary School opened in 1994 to serve the needs of a diverse group of students. Some of the students attending Kizer come from one of the most affluent areas of our county, while many others live in an extremely low socioeconomic area. During these three years, our school has struggled with meeting the needs of this wide range of students with continuing frustration that more attention is drawn to the demands of our more prosperous students while our at-risk population continues to suffer despite the ongoing efforts of school staff.

A total of 150 students at Kizer Elementary fit the criteria of *at-risk* as defined by the qualifications for free and reduced lunch. Translating this number into a percentage (31%) is quite deceiving. Schools with a much smaller student population and far fewer at-risk students overall are often seen as having greater need when numbers are translated into percentages. Our **percentage** does not presently entitle Kizer to Title I funding in spite of a large **number** of students (150) needing additional academic and social support.

In addition, Kizer has consistently ranked in the lower quartile in average daily attendance when compared to other elementary schools in Larson County. Examination of students with chronic attendance problems reveals that most are from a specific lower socioeconomic area of the Kizer attendance zone. It is important to note that poor attendance is often a symptom of underlying issues. Attendance problems can be indicative of chronic health issues, disorganized family life, family stress, bus problems and misunderstandings between home and school. The *target community* for this project can be characterized by many additional indicators of risk including a high number of single parent families, employment difficulties, financial hardships, substance abuse issues, and incidents of child neglect and abuse. Teachers more often report concerns regarding the performance and well being of this group of students than any other population in our school. A large majority of the students who qualify for free and reduced lunch at KES live within this same community set apart from the mainstream of Brighton. Indeed, the school social worker for LCPS identifies this area to be one of the neediest in all of Larson County.

Parental support has been documented as one important indicator of school success for children (Henderson and Berla, 1994). Parents of lower socioeconomic status are typically less likely than middle class parents to participate directly in the schooling of their children (Davies, 1988). This lack of involvement contributes to the risk factors that can inhibit children's learning and progress. This is true at Kizer Elementary where a university community often clamoring for greater academic rigor meets a less fortunate population whose chief concerns lean more toward meeting basic daily needs. Efforts to address these needs have included community mentors, home visitations, classroom incentives, and many opportunities for parents to come to the school. Unfortunately, very few parents from this population have become involved in the school in any substantial or sustainable way. Though we have tried many stop-gap measures (band-aid fixes), we must recognize that systemic problems require systemic solutions. A systemic approach to these issues became more plausible as our school began to implement strategies based on

Ernest Boyer's Basic School research. Ernest Boyer and the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching report on the essential elements of an effective elementary education in *The Basic School – A Community for Learning* (1995). Boyer's work asserts that effective schools must address four major priorities as the bases of their educational program. Those priorities include the school as community, a coherent curriculum, a climate for learning, and a commitment to character. The needs of at-risk students must be addressed with particular attention to these four domains. *The Basic School* cites examples of programs from across the country that exemplify actions which effectively address the needs of at-risk students. **The importance of building connections between families and schools is paramount among them.** Such connections are essential to the sense of community and the kind of climate that promote relevant learning and build better human beings who are prepared to face the world's many demands as productive and compassionate citizens.

This grant will become a part of a comprehensive school-wide plan that will make use of the Basic School framework as a foundation for meeting the needs of at-risk students by focusing on the tenet that Boyer calls "Parents as Partners."

Goals and Objectives

1. *To increase overall school attendance and engagement of the at-risk student population at Kizer Elementary School, we will:*
 - identify students who have a pattern of attendance problems;
 - arrange parent contacts to discuss (a) obstacles to regular attendance, (b) methods to eliminate those obstacles, and (c) a collaborative plan of improvement;
 - develop a mechanism to stay abreast of attendance problems and an early response system to prevent/eliminate ongoing obstacles to regular school attendance.
2. *To increase involvement of the at-risk parent population at Kizer Elementary, we will:*
 - build relationships that permit open communication between families and school personnel;
 - determine and address obstacles to school involvement by parents in the target population;
 - provide programs and resources of interest to the parents of children at-risk at our school based on direct input from the target population;
 - establish consistent school-home contact through regular phone calls, home visits, and notes of encouragement.
3. *To improve service delivery to targeted families through open communication and collaborative community efforts, we will:*
 - develop a network of community, business, and university resources ready to assist in addressing the needs of the at-risk community at Kizer;
 - more effectively address individual needs of at-risk students and their families as they arise through early attention and connections with appropriate resources and support.
4. *To prepare school faculty to assist and support Goals 1-3, we will:*
 - provide effective and relevant in-service training to all school faculty regarding barriers to parental involvement and mechanisms to overcome those barriers;
 - gather and share information regarding research and programs that have been successful in involving parents who do not typically connect with schools;
 - provide opportunities for representative teachers to visit schools where successful strategies for involving parents have been employed.

Activities and Procedures

During the 1997-1998 school year, we will:

- 1. Establish a committee that will include the guidance counselor, the school social worker, the school principal, and interested teachers to oversee this project. (September, 1997)**

It is the belief of this group that a focus on outreach to the neighborhood where most of the at-risk students who attend Kizer are now living will maximize the potential for success and reach the largest number of students and families in need.

- 2. Employ a part-time home-school coordinator (HSC) to assist the steering committee in achieving the goals and objectives as listed above. (November, 1997 - June, 1998)**

The HSC's primary function is to facilitate connections between the families of students identified as at-risk and the Kizer school community. Focusing on kindergarten through the third grade, this person's responsibilities will include keeping abreast of excessive absenteeism and other indicators of risk so that they may be addressed in an efficient and consistent manner. The HSC will aid teachers in parent contacts, arrange home visits, provide parenting programs, oversee the establishment and operation of a parent resource room, and act as a confidante and liaison for the parents of at-risk students at Kizer Elementary. The HSC will seek input from at-risk families regarding programs of interest and relevance to them and will arrange transportation and child care for parent programs offered at Kizer Elementary. The HSC will work with the teachers, the guidance counselor and the school principal to bring needed services to children and their families as they arise. By connecting parents to the outside support necessary for healthy families, the HSC will provide an additional service toward making school success a possibility. Qualifications for this position will include: a BA or MA degree in social work, counseling or a related field, the ability to communicate well with parents of children at-risk and school professionals; and the ability to work flexible hours to accommodate schedules of working families.

- 3. Use input gathered through early parent contacts to establish a parent resource room, plan parenting programs of interest to this group, address issues related to transportation as they arise, and arrange for volunteer child care at all school events that involve parents (November, 1997 - June, 1998).**
- 4. Provide inservice training and opportunity for teacher learning regarding how to involve the uninvolved parent (January - February, 1998).**
- 5. Seek sources of additional funding to sustain this program after the pilot year.**

Evaluation

A formal evaluation of the program's effectiveness and outcomes will be conducted in May of 1998 and will result in a report including effects on school attendance of at-risk pupils, parental attendance at school functions, and anecdotal evidence from teachers, staff, and participating families as direct evidence of each of the above goals and objectives.

Budget

- 10 hour per week position; Home School Coordinator - \$6000 - 30 weeks @ one fourth of teacher salary.

- Transportation Fund - \$1500 to include the following on an “as needed” basis:
 - Transportation to PTA meetings, evening parent programs, and daytime volunteer opportunities
 - Transportation of children and families to home after extended day activities
- Furnishing/outfitting parent resource room - books, pamphlets, brochures, refreshments, supplies - \$1000
- Travel funds for visits to sites with documented success in involving parents of children at-risk in the education of their children (particularly other schools using the Basic School framework.)- car rental, meals, lodging, substitute teachers - \$1500

References

- Boyer, E. (1995). *The Basic School: A Community for Learning*. Princeton, N.J.: Carnegie Foundation.
- Davies, D. (1988). Poor families and schools: an exploratory study of the perspectives of low-income parents and teachers in Boston, Liverpool, and Portugal. Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association (New Orleans, LA, April 5-9, 1988).
- Henderson & Berla, eds. (1994). *A New Generation of Evidence: The Family is Critical to Student Achievement*. National Committee for Citizens in Education.
- White-Clark, R. & Decker, L.E. (1996). *The “Hard to Reach” Parent: Old Challenges, New Insights*. National Community Education Association.

The following statements are provided in support of this proposal:

Karen Dreyfus, LCPS School Social Worker: As the school system's social worker I have the opportunity to work with many at-risk families referred to me. Kizer has shown a genuine interest in making the lives of their children at-risk and families better. They see the school as the critical link to helping families by offering programs and services beyond the traditional school programs. In the Kizer zone there are several high risk neighborhoods particularly in the Forest Mountain trailer courts. I have had numerous referrals over the years to assist families in that area. These areas are high risk due to poverty, child neglect, substance abuse, and neighborhood problems, among others. I support any efforts by Kizer Elementary and the school system to find creative and innovative ways to connect with low income families and help them see the school as a friendly and supportive resource to them.

*****, Senior Social Worker, Larson County Department of Social Services:*** There are certain areas in our county where families in need tend to cluster. One such area of very high risk is the Forest Mountain mobile home parks in the Kizer Elementary attendance zone. Multiple social problems often appear in these neighborhoods, ranging from neglected children to sewage disposal problems. The grant proposal being submitted by the staff at Kizer is absolutely wonderful. Such emphasis on involving the parents in these at-risk areas will hopefully begin to curb the cycle of need that occurs over and over in this community.

*****, Kizer PTA President:*** As president of the PTA at Kizer Elementary, I am very pleased to write this letter of support for the grant being submitted by the school staff. Having been very involved and on-site at Kizer over the past three years, I see a tremendous need to come up with new ways to engage the parents of our at-risk students. Just as the staff has been frustrated with finding ways to involve these parents, so too has the PTA struggled with finding ways to engage the parents of at-risk students in our functions. Providing transportation for the parents to PTA

meetings and other functions at the school is sure to create a positive working relationship between the school and these families. The PTA will certainly collaborate in any way possible to ensure the success of this project.

******, *HMU, Department of Educational Leadership and Policy Studies*: This grant proposal is an excellent example of how Ernest Boyer's Basic School research can be implemented to meet the needs of at-risk students. Particularly important is the focus on "parents as partners" which should significantly enhance the school's relationship with its at-risk community. If funded, this project could serve as a model for other schools to improve measurably their relationships with at-risk students and their parents.

******names omitted

APPENDIX J

Kizer Elementary School Home School Coordinator

The HSC's primary function is to facilitate connections between the families of students identified as at-risk and the Kizer school community.

Specific Responsibilities

1. **Case Management**

The HSC will:

- keep abreast of excessive absenteeism and other indicators of risk so that they may be addressed in an efficient and consistent manner;
- act as a confidante and liaison for the parents of at-risk students;
- visit homes of targeted at-risk families to assess strengths and needs for addressing school related issues;
- assist in accessing community services for families as needed.

2. **Program Development**

The HSC will:

- seek input from at-risk families regarding programs of interest and relevance to them;
- oversee the implementation of the "Parents as Partners" program;
- work with the "Parents as Partners" advisory team to evaluate the project and seek future funding for continuation of the program;
- keep a log of hours and activities to be used in program evaluation;
- emphasize early intervention (making K-3 a priority);
- develop program materials (brochures, flyers, etc.);
- gather donations and purchase materials supported by LCPS at-risk grant funds.

3. **Parent Education**

The HSC will:

- provide parenting programs based on input from early parent contacts;
- oversee the establishment and operation of a parent resource room;
- arrange transportation and child care for parent programs;
- provide in-home support/education as needed.

4. **Collaboration**

The HSC will:

- aid teachers in parent contacts;
- arrange home visits to include the classroom teacher whenever practical;
- facilitate teacher participation in home visits;
- facilitate parent participation in parent teacher conferences;
- address transportation issues as they arise;
- work with classroom teachers, the guidance counselor, the school social worker and the school principal to bring needed services to children and their families as they arise.

Qualifications for this position include:

- BA or MA degree in social work, counseling, a related field, or equivalent experience;
- the ability to communicate well with parents of children at-risk and school professionals;
- the ability to work flexible hours (approximately 12 – 15 hours per week) to accommodate schedules of working families.

APPENDIX K
 SAMPLE OF PRIORITY STUDENT MATRIX WITHOUT STUDENT NAMES

LOCATION	F/R LUNCH	7+ ABSENCES 10/24	TEACHER ID	Test	PR/GCO ID	TOTAL Xs
X	X	X	X		XX	6
X	X		X		X	4
X	X		X		XX	5
X	X	X			X	4
X	X		X	X	XX	5
X	X	X	X		XX	6
X	X		X		XX	5
X			X		XX	4
X	X		X		XX	5
	X	X			X	3
X	X				X	3
X	X				XX	4
X	X				XX	4
X	X		X		XX	5
X	X				X	3
X	X		X		XX	5
X	X				X	3
X	X				XX	4
X	X		X			3
X					XX	3
X	X		X	X		5
X	X	X				3
X	X				X	4
X	X		X			5
X	X		X		XX	5
X	X				X	3
X	X		X		XX	5
X	X		X		XX	5
X	X				XX	4
X	X	X	X		XX	6
X	X	X			XX	5
X	X		X		XX	5

APPENDIX L
KIZER PRIORITY STUDENT INTERVENTION

Student Name: _____ **Grade:** _____

CLASSROOM TEACHER CONTACTS:

Teacher: _____

Date:	Person Contacted Relationship to Child	Contact Mode	Concern	Response
<hr/>				

KIZER PRIORITY STUDENT INTERVENTION

STUDENT NAME: _____ **GRADE:** _____

INTERVENTION TEAM CONTACTS:

Home/School Coordinator: _____ **Date:** _____

Guidance Counselor: _____ **Date:** _____

Principal: _____ **Date:** _____

Date	School Personnel Initiating Contact	Contact Mode	Participants	Presenting Issue	Response
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**APPENDIX M
BROCHURE**

GET INVOLVED!

WHAT RESEARCH SAYS ABOUT
PARENTS AND SCHOOLS

“The evidence is now beyond dispute. When schools work together with families to support learning, children tend to succeed not just in school, but throughout life.” (Henderson and Berla, A New Generation of Evidence: The Family is Critical to Student Achievement, 1994).

“The message is clear. It is simply impossible to have an island of excellence in a sea of community indifference, and when parents become school partners, the results can be consequential and enduring. (Ernest Boyer, The Basic School, 1995).

“The American family is the rock on which a solid education can and must be built.” (Richard Riley, U.S. Secretary of Education, 1994).

Parent Involvement doesn't always mean volunteering at school – though we appreciate these efforts very much!

Parent Involvement means:

- encouraging regular school attendance.
- learning about what happens at school.
- asking questions when you have them.
- showing your children how and what **you** like to learn.
- asking your children about their hopes and dreams.
- sharing your own hopes and dreams for your children with them and with their teachers.
- listening, reading and sharing.

Every parent can be an involved parent!

FOR INFORMATION CONTACT

PATTI TALBOT
HOME/SCHOOL COORDINATOR
KIZER ELEMENTARY SCHOOL

XXX-XXXX (Tuesdays and Wednesdays)
ptalbot@xx.xxx



AT

**KIZER
ELEMENTARY
SCHOOL**

HOME/SCHOOL COORDINATOR

Patti Talbot is the newly assigned Home/School Coordinator at Kizer. She was hired using grant funding from Larson County Public Schools to build connections between families and the Kizer school community.

Patti's main job is to assist parents in teacher contacts and to assist teachers in parent contacts. She will also keep track of excessive absences so that they may be addressed efficiently and consistently. Children who come to school regularly are more likely to achieve well academically.

With the help of a committee of teachers and parents, the Home/School Coordinator will oversee the establishment and operation of the new Parent Place, plan activities, provide parenting programs and arrange home visits and other services for families as necessary.

THE PARENT PLACE

The Parent Place is a room especially for parents. It includes a growing library of materials on a wide variety of topics of interest to parents. It is our hope to include materials for parents to share with their children to support learning at home. All resource items may be checked out for home use or enjoyed on site in the Parent Place.

In this room, there is also a computer for parent use that we hope will be Internet accessible very soon. Please feel free to come by and make use of this wonderful resource for your own activities and learning.

The Parent Place is located off the cafeteria near the serving lines. Stop by the next time you come to have breakfast or lunch with your children at school. This space is intended to be a lounge and small meeting place just for parents of students at Kizer.

Watch for upcoming announcements about special programs for parents happening in the Parent Place. If you have ideas for a program or activity helpful to parents, please contact Patti Talbot at Kizer.

TRANSPORTATION

Can't get here? Don't worry. Contact Patti Talbot, Kizer Home/School Coordinator, to arrange a ride to important programs and teacher conferences at school. Your presence is important to us!

CHILD CARE

Free child care is available at all PTA programs and events for parents. If your children are not a part of the program, rest assured that we will have something for them to do and someone to watch over them while you attend school meetings and programs. Contact Patti Talbot for more information.

HOME VISITS

If it is inconvenient for you to come to school for parent/teacher conferences, we will arrange to come to you. Please let us know if you would like a home visit from the home/school coordinator, the school counselor or your child's teacher. What you have to say is important!

APPENDIX N

Follow-up Survey Responses

What do you predict will be the future of the Parents as Partners Project at Kizer?

If funding continues?

- I think we have some wonderful ideas but I think that even if funding does continue at its present rate it is too much to do for a part-time position.
-
- Keep the parent room open
 - Have books and information to pass out
 - Support parent/teacher communication
-
- A HSC could be hired. The room will remain. The counselor will do what she is able to do. Unless parents have assumed leadership.
-
- I predict the future will be bright for the project. Hopefully, funding will permit hiring someone to oversee the program. I think this is crucial. I think that if the program continues to do as well as it is presently that a greater sense of trust will be established between those harder to reach parents and school.
-
- We really need the right person in your position (The HSC). I see this person 1) Able to work with the trailer park population in a friendly way, 2) Willing to pursue ways to reach out, 3) Must have a sense of humor.
-
- I would like to see Parents as Partners continue to grow. I think the direction in which it is going is extremely positive and necessary.

If it doesn't?

- The job seems too overwhelming to be done by teachers.

- May still be a place for parents to hang out but there will be no personal touch.

- The project will definitely dwindle.

- I can see the room remaining, but the outreach will be more limited. It is such a large job for a teacher to do alone while teaching full-time.

- I don't think a teacher on staff can do both roles – teacher and outreach. If we don't get the grant, I see the project as dead. The outreach person is essential.

- I hope a committee of teachers/staff at Kizer will take over as much as possible. I think this depends a lot on how organized and successful the rest of this year is.

What hopes do you have for the future of the project?

- I hope it will be successful. I really think it could be one of the best things we could ever do for the success of the children whose parents we could get involved.

- To provide/advertise as a parent friendly place
- Help to get more parents to school
- Possible encourage reading at home early

- I hope parents will assume leadership.

-
- I hope that eventually we can focus on the preschool/early intervention aspect of the program. An outreach program to help preschoolers receive books/supplies would be wonderful (especially to a kindergarten teacher☺).

-
- I think the project is just getting started. I guess I see a lot of work done by the family but mostly done by you (HSC). I hope we can see some response from some of the parents. (probably wishful thinking on my part.) I do think the project is worthwhile.

(pointing back to her response in number 1)

- Prediction and hope (thinking positively!).

APPENDIX O
Data Reference Codes

Code	Key
J	Journal/Fieldnotes
SaC	School as Community Family Meeting Transcript
FR	Family Representative Meeting Transcript
ARGA	At-Risk Grant Advisory Meeting Transcript
KCCT	Kizer Comprehensive Community Team Meeting Transcript
Two initials only	Interview transcripts

VITA

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WORK (540)951-5760
HOME (540)552-5748
email: ptalbot@vt.edu

PATRICIA A. TALBOT

EMPLOYMENT

1982 - Present Montgomery County Public Schools
Classroom Teacher/Guidance Counselor

- 7 years as a 4th and 5th grade teacher
- 7 years as an elementary counselor
- presently at-risk home-school coordinator

EDUCATION

1978-1981, 1987-1989, 1994-1998

Virginia Tech Blacksburg, VA

B.A. Elementary Education

M.A. Student Personnel Services

C.A.G.S. Educational Administration

Ed. D. Educational Administration

CERTIFICATIONS

Early Education NK-4

Elementary Grades 4-7

Elementary School Counselor

K-12 Administrator