

**From Education Week, Dec. 26, 2007**  
**Commentary**  
**Teaching Low-Income Parents to ‘Work the System’**  
**By Edwin C. Darden**

Jerry D. Weast, the schools superintendent in Montgomery County, Md., was recently asked what he was doing to improve low-performing schools. His answer should serve as a wake-up call for school districts throughout the nation. Weast replied that his public school district spends big bucks every year trying to teach low-income parents “how to kick my butt ... how to work the system just like affluent people.”

With that vivid statement, Weast spoke volumes about both the need for involving parents inside their children’s schools, and the reality of making that happen—especially in struggling communities that desperately need engaged parents. In affluent neighborhoods, parents not only know how to “work the system,” they can afford to get involved. White-collar jobs allow them the flexibility to attend parent-teacher conferences, volunteer in the classroom, and chaperone field trips. Well-heeled parents assume their children are entitled to the best and are quick to maneuver the chain of command, create reform-minded coalitions, or advocate one-on-one for change when the system isn’t working for their families.

It is wrong to assume that an education degree automatically translates into an understanding of how to reach out to parents. By contrast, few parents living on the edge of poverty believe they have the power to make a difference in the quality of their children’s education. For many, school did not serve them well; as a result, they may be intimidated from trying to engage teachers and administrators. What’s more, inflexible work schedules, language barriers, and child-care needs place formidable obstacles between the school door and the reality of living paycheck to paycheck.

Teachers, principals, and administrators should be trained in effective techniques and held accountable for bringing parents into schools. They should understand that an important piece of their jobs is engaging parents in the task of educating kids. The federal No Child Left Behind Act has the potential to address these problems and spark greater parental involvement throughout the United States. In fact, that was the original intent of the legislation when it was signed into law six years ago. As Congress contemplates the reauthorization of NCLB, a greater focus on involving parents should not get lost in the debate over other higher-profile issues. The House Education and Labor Committee’s “discussion draft” and subsequent hearings by the committee only skimmed the surface. The Senate has yet to release its recommendations in a single, significant package.

The problem is not the law itself. NCLB has an entire section dedicated to parent involvement. [Section 1118 of Title I](#) requires that parents receive academic-performance information, requires parent-involvement policies in underachieving schools, and promotes other sound policies for parent-school relationships. What is called for is greater compliance, more faithful monitoring, and true consequences for nonconforming school districts that fail to engage parents. The grand battles over testing, adequate yearly progress, and reconstitution of failing schools threaten to swamp efforts to strengthen compliance with NCLB’s parental-involvement provisions. Yet making parents partners in education could be the key to raising test scores and setting kids on a path to success.

For that to happen, a focused effort is needed to draw in increasingly diverse parent populations. A growing number of parents arrive from places on the globe where criticizing any government institution could land them in jail or worse. In many countries, there is simply no tradition of an active, engaged citizenry that participates in public

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institutions to ensure they deliver for constituents. As Congress contemplates the reauthorization of NCLB, a greater focus on involving parents should not get lost in the debate over other higher-profile issues.

The situation, however, is far from hopeless. Solutions start by acknowledging that many parents, as Superintendent Weast says, don’t naturally divine how to “work the system.” They need help in learning how to productively engage teachers, principals, and administrators. They need to know that they have both the right and the responsibility to get involved.

Well-off school systems, like Weast’s in Maryland, have begun adopting parent-friendly programs and policies, making the admirable choice to spend precious dollars educating parents residing in poverty-stricken areas. Montgomery County operates a call center to answer questions in Spanish and English, for example, and the system’s [“Parent Academy”](#) offers more than 35 free workshops on the home-and-school connection. In addition, important parent information is translated and available online in Chinese, French, Korean, Vietnamese, and other languages.

Sure, engaging some parents can be tough. But let’s not continue to point an accusatory finger at “no-show” moms and dads until we ensure that schools have done everything they can to accommodate schedules, communicate in understandable languages, and help people realize they have the power, the legal right, and the responsibility to get involved in their children’s education.

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