



**Alliance for Achievement:
Building a School Community Focused on Learning**

by

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For two decades, educators have attempted to get parents more involved in children's learning. Experts agree that parental involvement is crucial to student success, but too often the typical involvement—work on fund-raising, open houses, and school committees—is detached from an understanding of the type of involvement that research has shown necessary for improved student learning. Thus, parental support of teachers in helping students with schoolwork and responsible conduct is often overlooked. The Alliance for Achievement (AFA), a blueprint for research and educational guidance begun in 1989 in Illinois, has engaged parents in such support by promoting implementation of school communities and extension of the curriculum into the home. Evaluations of AFA efforts have shown positive results.

The AFA blueprint is based on the beliefs that shared values among teachers, parents, and students improve academic achievement and that school and home belong to the same, mutually influencing system. Informing these beliefs is research on learning factors (Wang, Haertel, & Walberg, 1993), social capital (Coleman, 1987), and the school community (Sergiovanni, 1994).

This report on AFA efforts in mid-Atlantic public schools describes the AFA project adopted by the Laboratory for Student Success (LSS), The U.S.

Department of Education's Mid-Atlantic Regional Educational Laboratory. The report reviews relevant literature on community and outlines the project's methods of analysis and implementation. Some effects of the LSS project on school community and learning outcomes are discussed; recommendations for future work are offered; and the current integration of AFA into a larger school reform effort, the Mega Demonstration Project, is described.

The Alliance for Achievement Project

This project aimed to engage parents in children's learning and to strengthen school-family bonds. The project provided guidance on forming School Community Councils (SCCs) and supported councils in implementing goals. The effects of implementation were field-tested using the AFA School Community Index (SCI) and the LSS Degree of Implementation assessment tool. Between 1996 and 1998, personnel in 24 Pennsylvania and Maryland schools were trained to implement the AFA blueprint. It stipulates that each school's principal, teachers, and parents form an SCC and that a *Planning Guide* for regular meetings be followed to ensure that educational values develop, school-home communication and education thrive, intergenerational bonds strengthen, and community agencies help shape the school community.

Literature Review

A review of the literature on community shows a rich sociological tradition relevant to recent ideas about children's learning. The school community has increasingly been seen as resisting an alienating modern society by operating with values shared by schools, families, and the larger community. Sociologists have long understood that communities are based on values like collective action, reciprocal obligations, and group loyalty. These values can free individuals from restrictions of families and buffer them from an increasingly impersonal society.

Recent research shows that communities help children cope with the demands of individualism and peer pressure by providing stable values. The idea of social capital, examined by Coleman (1987) and Putnam (1995), suggests that society must invest in values; otherwise they can be lost just as financial capital can. Walberg (1984) urges that schools help families generate social capital through what he calls "the curriculum of the home." Other researchers, studying effects of parental involvement on children's achievement, conclude that parental cooperation in instruction improves academic performance.

Yet attempts to use this understanding have been disappointing, partly because of changes in family structure, such as the growing absence of fathers.

Yet attempts to increase parental support continue, using innovative ideas like intergenerational closure (Coleman, 1990) to facilitate children's contact with adults beyond the family in the school community. The Alliance for Achievement is one significant initiative attempting to research and put into practice such contact.

Methods

Alliance implementation in the mid-Atlantic region was carried out through activities of the implementation staff, which provided orientation to interested schools, helped train SCCs, and provided ongoing support. The SCI was administered to parents and teachers at the start of the project and at the end. Implementation was continuously assessed. Although not available to all schools involved, implementation staff provided administrative support. The schools varied in degree of implementation because of institutional factors. Seven Pennsylvania schools in one district followed through sufficiently for their change in degree of implementation from 1996 to 1998 to be assessed.

Project assessment was based primarily on SCI data and on demographic, institutional, and state achievement test data from schools. Using Likert-scale questions investigating parental involvement, home curriculum factors, and school community perceptions, the SCI was administered to parents and teachers in separate versions. Overall school results were used for correlational analyses. Target returns were 90% (teachers) and 40% (parents). Preliminary SCI results and a written interpretation were given to SCCs to plan school community improvements. The SCI and other data answered research questions about various relationships among socioeconomic and institutional characteristics, school community factors, degree of project implementation, changes in learning outcomes (test scores), and changes in SCI results during the study. Correlations that addressed the questions were conducted and tabulated.

Results and Discussion

Since assessment involved only a small number of schools in one district, the findings on those questions were limited. SCI results did show statistically significant differences between schools. Positively associated were school attendance and school community components like parental involvement in reading; negatively associated were poverty and both school community and test scores. Test scores were also positively related to school community factors. Degree of implementation correlated only slightly with changes in parental perceptions of school community and somewhat more with changes in teacher perceptions. Implementation correlated positively with reading and math score changes, while some SCI changes correlated positively with test-score changes.

The low association between implementation and parental perceptions of school community could be explained by low parental awareness of implementation or, given clear gains found in curriculum-of-the-home factors in parent reports, by early changes in family behavior having lasting effects unrelated to implementation. The correlation between school community gains and achievement gains is assumed to be causal. Although only one school had a degree of implementation that seemed sufficient to affect learning outcomes, the correlation of implementation and learning indicates promise for future school community efforts.

Recommendations

Further study and implementation to corroborate or modify these findings is needed. For this work to be effective, AFA efforts must gain support from school administrators, school governance and SCC goals must not conflict, the AFA model must fit schools' improvement strategies, and AFA implementers like LSS must establish positive relationships with schools. Moreover, schools should understand the high commitment required of SCCs, and adequate field support for the councils should be provided, including extension offices. Reporting and

publicizing of implementation progress should also be augmented, and SCC members from different schools should interact more often.

Objectives for further work on the project also include extending supportive activities, such as certifications and conferences, for current sites; supporting implementation with a revised *Planning Guide*; and sustaining research and training to help more schools build themselves into true and flourishing communities.

Finally, where other school-reform components function within a school, they should coordinate with AFA efforts. Indeed, AFA is currently coordinated with other components of the Mega Demonstration Project, a collaborative effort to establish and demonstrate structures and practices to maintain continuous school improvement. This project uses the framework of the Community for Learning (CFL), a research-based and field-tested comprehensive school-reform program developed at the Temple University Center for Research in Human Development and Education (CRHDE). The integrated AFA component is a significant element in the Mega Demonstration Project, contributing to its efforts to build school community.

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