

**Public Engagement Project**  
**Family-School-Community Partnerships**

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***Stories of Closing Achievement Gaps***  
***Through Community Engagement***

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## About NEA's Public Engagement Project

The statistics are alarming: more than 80 percent of white students graduate from high school, while barely 60 percent of African-American and Hispanic students graduate. Scores on the National Assessment of Educational Progress, “the nation’s report card,” follow a similar pattern.

NEA’s Public Engagement Project is closing achievement gaps based on this premise: It’s time we take family and community engagement as seriously as we take curriculum, standards, and tests. The approach is driven by real-life experience. Nine out of 10 students attend public schools, where NEA members work at every level from pre-kindergarten to post-graduate university programs.

Research shows that partnerships of schools, families, and community organizations dedicated to student success can play a vital role in closing achievement gaps among students of similar ability. As the Annenberg Institute for School Reform concludes in its analysis of multiple research studies extending over six years, *Building Partnerships to Reinvent School Culture* (Harvard University Press, 2009), such partnerships consistently contribute to:

- Better attendance
- Higher test scores
- Completing high school
- Aspiring to a college education

Over the last five years, NEA and its affiliates have convened more than 125 community conversations in 21 states — catalysts for just the kind of change the research indicates we need. Local union and community leaders form coalitions of families, students, teachers, business people, clergy, and other stakeholders. Working together, they identify causes of achievement gaps in their communities, set priorities, develop and implement action plans, and mobilize to get results. Examples follow.

## **Becoming Compadres in Education**

Putnam City West High School  
Oklahoma City, Oklahoma

Putnam City West High School serves a rapidly changing, ethnically and economically mixed cross-section of Oklahoma City, Oklahoma. The student body of more than 1,600 turns over at the rate of 40 percent per year. Twenty percent of the school's students are Hispanic and more than two-thirds are eligible for free or reduced-price lunch.

NEA's Public Engagement Project laid the foundation for Compadres in Education. The Oklahoma Education Association (OEA), school and community leaders have been an integral part of the program from the start. Parents, teachers, and students are deeply involved. Other participants include the Francis Tuttle Technology Center, Oklahoma State University and Regents for Higher Education, the University of Oklahoma, the Hispanic Chamber of Commerce, Gear Up, and the state's Departments of Education and Rehabilitation Services.

Software donated by IBM, valued at \$20,000, translates English documents into Spanish, greatly enhancing communication between the school and Hispanic families.

### **Locals learn to sustain program**

NEA and OEA provided seed money, and trained local community members to facilitate, structure, and record community conversations. Participants in these conversations identified the main factors contributing to achievement gaps locally, formulated plans to address them, and took action.

Community members also learned to conduct such structured conversations themselves, building local capacity to sustain the program.

As a result of community conversations, each quarter the school opens its doors for Noche de Padres Hispánicos or Hispanic Family Night, which students and their families attend together. Fifty people attended the first event. Now, it regularly draws crowds four or five times that size.

### **Discussion is community-driven**

Presentations demonstrate the economic value of higher education, contrasting the earnings of students with high school diplomas, certificates from two-year training programs, and bachelor's degrees from four-year colleges. Teachers help students and their families fill out financial aid forms, including the notoriously difficult-to-complete Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) and applications for Oklahoma's Promise, a state scholarship program for students from families with annual incomes below \$50,000.

Discussion is community-driven and wide-ranging, addressing topics such as the legal rights of immigrants and their school-aged children, the challenges of raising teens in today's world, success in school, and the college landscape — entrance requirements and how to apply. Bilingual teachers and community volunteers provide individualized enrollment assistance for students and their families.

Other actions taken by Putnam City West in response to concerns expressed during community conversations include:

- Hiring more bilingual staff members.
- Providing school- and district-wide professional development to enrich teaching and enhance achievement among English-language learners.
- Furnishing written descriptions of course offerings in Spanish and in English, with emphasis on college entrance requirements.
- Expanding opportunities for student service-learning in the community, especially for those at risk of dropping out.

### **Graduation rates and test scores rise**

According to Assistant Principal Melanie Pealor, the number of Hispanic students graduating from Putnam City West rose by nearly 70 percent between 2008 and 2009. The pass rate among Hispanic students on the End-of-Instruction Test in English II, a statewide graduation requirement, rose from 55 percent in 2007 to 77 percent in 2008. Hispanic students' Academic Performance Index, a broader measure of achievement, rose from 839 in 2006 to 1,152 in 2008 on a scale of 1,500.

Community conversations are also being used as a tool to close achievement gaps in other parts of Oklahoma — for example, in Weatherford, where OEA, the school district, and the Native American Task Force are working together. The work is showing

evidence of positive impact. According to the *Weatherford Daily News*, 87 percent of Native American students scored “proficient” on the Academic Performance Index in 2008, compared to 76 percent in 2006.

### **Highlights**

- The number of graduating Hispanic students rose by nearly 70 percent between 2008 and 2009.
- The pass rate among Hispanic students on the End-of-Instruction Test in English II, a statewide graduation requirement, rose from 55 percent in 2007 to 77 percent in 2008.
- Hispanic students’ Academic Performance Index, a broader measure of achievement, rose from 839 in 2006 to 1,152 in 2008 on a scale of 1,500.

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## **Building 21<sup>st</sup> Century Skills**

Linden McKinley Middle/High School  
Columbus, Ohio

Suffering from geographic isolation, under-resourced facilities, and mounting discipline problems, Linden-Mickinley High School met just two of the state's 12 indicators for student achievement during the 2007-08 school year. The graduation rate was 52 percent. Students — 90 percent of whom were poor and African American — were departing in droves for local charter schools.

To address these problems, the community formed a task force composed of stakeholders ranging from the Columbus Education Association (CEA) to St. Stephens Community House. The group recommended radical change: introducing a new curriculum built around STEM (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics); emphasizing 21<sup>st</sup> century skills such as critical thinking and problem solving; and combining middle and high school (grades 7 through 12).

The school district accepted the recommendations, but community members had reservations.

### **Where do I sign my child up?**

With the support of the NEA's Public Engagement Project, CEA convened a community conversation attended by more than 300 people — parents, business leaders, teachers, district administrators, and local faith-based and political leaders. They responded enthusiastically to a presentation on the new STEM curriculum and its potential to close achievement gaps. On an interactive survey, 85 percent said all students can succeed when families, communities, and schools work together.

"Parents left that conversation asking, 'Where do I sign up my child?' We're going to see students come back to the Linden community from charter schools," said Rhonda Johnson, president of CEA.

Michelle Mills, CEO of St. Stephens Community House, concurred. "Linden was at a turning point," she said. "Without that community conversation, parents would not have been involved, enrollment would have plummeted, and the school would probably have closed. Now they believe change is actually going to happen."

### **Workers in STEM occupations earn 70 percent more**

Renovating, expanding, and retrofitting Linden-McKinley is a big investment — \$34 million, according to *The Columbus Dispatch* — but the potential benefits are even bigger. As a group, workers in STEM occupations earn about 70 percent more than the national average, according to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (*Occupational Outlook Quarterly*, Spring 2007).

The new facility is scheduled to open in the fall of 2011. It will have separate wings for different age groups, alleviating concern among some families about middle and older high school students mingling in the same building.

The revamped curriculum includes advanced placement and college-level courses, as well as practical advice — for example, on opening your own business. English and social studies courses stress basics such as reading, research, and writing. Math and science are taught together through experiments, demonstrations, and hands-on investigation. Mentors from nearby Nationwide Children’s Hospital and Battelle, the area’s largest employer of STEM-trained personnel, provide information about careers in fields such as medical technology and biomedical engineering.

### **NEA Foundation provides \$50,000 grant**

In May 2009, on the heels of the Public Engagement Project’s success with Linden-McKinley, the city of Columbus received a \$50,000 planning grant from the NEA Foundation — one of only five awarded to urban school districts. The grant is part of the foundation’s signature program, “Closing the Achievement Gaps,” which revolves around union and school district collaboration, family and community partnerships, and quality teaching.

Linden-McKinley is part of the Ohio STEM Learning Network, which is composed of 10 public schools and 26 related K-8 programs. Supporters include NEA, CEA, the NEA Foundation, the KnowledgeWorks Foundation, the AFT’s Cleveland and Cincinnati affiliates, the Ohio Supercomputer Center, colleges and universities throughout the state, Battelle, the Ohio Business Roundtable, and other members of the business community.



## Highlights

- The Columbus Education Association built community support for a groundbreaking plan to transform a failing school with a new curriculum that revolves around STEM (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics) and 21<sup>st</sup> century skills.
- Students are choosing the transformed school over charter schools.
- Linden-McKinley is part of the Ohio STEM Learning Network, which is supported by NEA, AFT, and their Ohio affiliates; the NEA Foundation; the KnowledgeWorks Foundation; Battelle and other members of the business community; and colleges and universities throughout the state.

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## **Focusing on Academics**

Franklin County School

Franklin County, Florida

Franklin County, a rural area with a population of about 11,000, harvests 10 percent of the oysters sold in the United States. Home to a vibrant arts community, bustling tourism industry, and miles of beaches and state parks, it is also the only county in Florida with a single school building that houses kindergarten through twelfth grade.

With the support of NEA's Public Engagement Project and a coalition led by the Florida Education Association (FEA), the Franklin County Teachers Association (FCTA), and other stakeholders, in the spring of 2008 the community held a series of conversations about a controversial plan. Seven schools — three elementary schools, two middle schools, and two high schools — were being combined to create a single K-12 school serving three distinct communities: Apalachicola, Carrabelle, and Eastpoint.

County officials had concluded that consolidation was the only way for the education system to succeed. Families and students were not so sure. Tensions among the three communities were already running high — they had a long history of competition for county resources and rivalry in sports.

### **Competition gives way to collaboration**

"There were three distinct communities with a history of competition, not collaboration. All of a sudden, they were an extended family. That kind of change doesn't come easily," said Rik McNeill, executive director of FEA's Central Panhandle Service Unit.

Under the auspices of NEA's Public Engagement Project, three months before the scheduled opening of the new school, parents, teachers, business, and county leaders gathered for dinner and discussion in the Eastpoint Church of God, symbolically situated smack in the center of the county. Although participants came from diverse backgrounds, their top priority was the same: raising student achievement.

The gathering paved the way for a smooth transition to the new building, without hostilities or violence as had been feared. "Everyone from mayors to custodians agrees that the union played a key role in bringing people together during the transition period.

We were able to do so because we believed in a common cause — raising student achievement — and put heart as well as mind behind that cause,” said McNeill.

### **More students meet high standards**

When the consolidated school opened for its second year, the “news was all good,” reported the Apalachicola and Carrabelle *Times*. The district turned in its best performance since 2002 with 63 percent of students meeting high standards in reading, 68 percent meeting high standards in math, and 76 percent meeting high standards in writing in 2009.

Franklin County School made its biggest gains in writing. The share of students meeting high standards rose from 59 percent in 2008 to 71 percent in 2009 among fourth graders, and from 76 percent in 2008 to 85 percent among seventh and eighth graders in 2009. “The writing scores were so good that prior to a meeting, we held a pinning ceremony to recognize 19 faculty members for a job well done,” said Superintendent Nina Marks.

Before the consolidation, it was not uncommon for students to skip school to go “oystering” (catch oysters) in Apalachicola Bay. Now, parents and students agree, “There’s more to life than enjoying the bay,” said Cathy Wood, FCTA president.

### **Voters raise educators’ salaries 25 percent**

Community conversations also paved the way for sorely needed gains among educators. Shortly after the gathering in Eastpoint, Franklin County voters passed a referendum that boosted educators’ salaries substantially. The \$29,100 annual starting salary for teachers rose by 10 percent in 2008 (to \$32,010), by 8 percent in 2009 (to \$34,570), and by 6 percent in 2010 (to \$36,644) — a total of about \$7,500 or 25 percent in three years.

NEA’s Public Engagement Project has had a positive effect on the bottom line in nearby Gadsden County as well. Families, students, teachers, and other community members pitched in and helped renovate Shanks Middle School; their sweat equity allowed \$100,000 in school district funds to be used for other purposes.

## Highlights

- Former athletic rivals collaborated to create a consolidated K-12 school that is making big academic gains.
- Franklin County School made its biggest advances in writing, where the share of students meeting high standards rose from 76 percent in 2008 to 85 percent among seventh and eighth graders in 2009.
- Overall, the school district turned in its best performance since 2002 with 63 percent of students meeting high standards in reading, 68 percent meeting high standards in math, and 76 percent meeting high standards in writing in 2009.

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## Closing Achievement Gaps

Little Rock School District

Little Rock, Arkansas

In its landmark 1954 decision, *Brown v. the Board of Education*, the Supreme Court declared that “the doctrine of ‘separate but equal’ has no place” in public education and ordered desegregation with “all deliberate speed.” In 1957, President Dwight D. Eisenhower dispatched federal troops to enforce the court’s order and enroll nine black students in Central High School.

Half a century later, that seminal conflict in the civil rights movement is still being played out in the schools of Little Rock, Arkansas.

### **Legacy of Central High lives on**

With 48 schools and some 27,000 students in pre-K through grade 12, the Little Rock School District is the largest in Arkansas. Nearly 70 percent of the district’s students are African American and two-thirds are economically disadvantaged.

“It’s like going back in time. The legacy of Central High School is still around. There’s still a lot of racial strife,” says Dana Fisher, a 24-year resident of Little Rock who worked closely with the student-focused Community Advocates for Public Education (CAPE), a key partner in organizing a series of community conversations convened by the Little Rock Classroom Teachers Association (LRCTA).

Fisher continued, “The community learned it must get involved. We can’t leave it to everybody else because we *are* everybody else.”

### **African-American community mobilizes**

With support from NEA’s Public Engagement Project, LRCTA and its coalition partners hosted its first community conversation during the tumultuous summer of 2007. Federal supervision of the school district, started by Eisenhower 50 years before, had ended that February. In May, the city’s first majority-black school board ousted Superintendent Roy Brooks for failing to address lagging achievement among low-income and African-American students.

More than 250 people attended the community conversation. Participants identified — and acted on — three top priorities: encouraging family and community involvement, strengthening intervention programs for students who fall behind, and clearly defining what is expected of all students.

“The response from the community was incredible,” said Cathy Koehler, president of LRCTA. “The community conversations engaged people who hadn’t previously been concerned with achievement gaps.”

### **Union perceived as positive force**

Progress is beginning to be made. The district’s high school graduation rate was 83 percent in 2008, compared to 76 percent in 2006. Among African-American fifth graders, the achievement gap in mathematics has narrowed by 20 percentage points: 45 percent scored “proficient” in 2009, compared to 25 percent in 2006.

Karen DeJarnette, director of the Little Rock School District’s Planning, Research and Evaluation Department, attributes these gains to greater involvement of — and increased outreach to — previously marginalized groups, especially the African American community. “African Americans were far more involved than ever before in Little Rock. Not only were they present [at the community conversations], they were the leaders of the conversations.”

“People now see us [the local union] as a force for positive change, when they used to see us as obstructionist,” Koehler said. “They honestly believe that we want change as much as they do. It’s a huge paradigm shift.”

### **Highlights**

- The high school graduation rate rose by more than 7 percent in the Little Rock School District, from 76 percent in 2006 to 83 percent in 2008.
- The achievement gap in mathematics narrowed by 20 percentage points for African-American fifth graders: 45 percent scored “proficient” in 2009, compared to 25 percent in 2006.

**Contact**

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