



Educate, Engage, and Empower:

Strategies for Effective Parent Engagement in School Reform, from Lessons Learned in Extended Learning Time and Parent Engagement in Newark



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The Abbott Leadership Institute is housed within the Urban Education Department of Rutgers University-Newark. This Parents as Partners in Extended Learning Time project, and this report, were funded by the Ford Foundation, as a part of the More and Better Learning Time Initiative.

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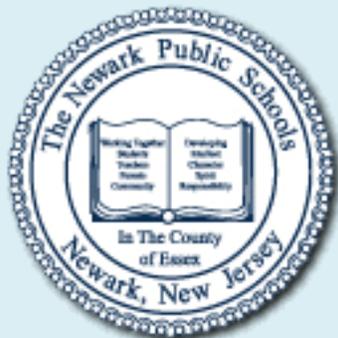
The Abbott Leadership Institute would like to thank each of the following partners for their support on this project:



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FOUNDATION

RUTGERS

UNIVERSITY | NEWARK



*Special Thanks to the
ALI Parents as Partners
in Extended Learning
Time Leadership Team*

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Strategies for Effective Parent Engagement in School Reform



Introduction to the Abbott Leadership Institute

The Mission of the **Abbott Leadership Institute (ALI) at Rutgers University-Newark** is to develop informed and effective education advocates for Newark Public Schools (NPS) in Newark, NJ, by empowering parents, students, educators and community advocates through information about education policies, practices and methodologies for effective school reform. For the past 14 years, **ALI** has worked to *increase meaningful parent and community engagement* in public education reform in Newark, through classes held on Saturdays at the Rutgers University Newark campus. **ALI** has taught more than 4,500 education stakeholders in some area of public school reform, launched advocacy initiatives with our parents and students at the helm, and empowered families, educators and students to effectively participate in initiatives that improve the lives of children in Newark.

A Look at Newark Public Schools

There are factors in Newark, NJ that make it a perfect learning space for practices aimed at improving parent engagement. Newark is the largest city in New Jersey, with a population of 70,000 children, with 34,976 enrolled in K-12 district schools. In 2013, 52 percent of children were African American, 42 percent were Hispanic, and 6 percent were white, non-Hispanic. Twenty-two percent of students were characterized as “other”. Approximately 71% of Newark’s children live in low income households. The median income for Newark families is \$32,466, compared to \$85,249 in New Jersey. The NPS district struggles with low tests scores, inequitable

distribution of resources, high principal and teacher turnover, decreases in enrollment and school budgets due to charter school growth, and poorly implemented school reform initiatives. Over the last seven years, the district has been under the leadership of three different Superintendents and with each, differing strategies for school improvement, none of which championed authentic parent partnership.

The problems that plague Newark Public Schools are addressed only through the persistent and informed advocacy of an actively engaged parent base, working with community advocates, students and professional educators with a shared goal for quality education. The implementation of an extended school day provides districts such as Newark, with a critical opportunity to engage parents in a meaningful way.

The Abbott Leadership Institute Approach to Parent Engagement in Extended Learning Time

In 2011, Newark Public Schools (NPS) began the process of launching an Extended Learning Time (ELT) program in a select number of schools, labeled “Renew”. In 2013, ALI conducted research on parent knowledge and participation in the ELT initiatives. Two focus group sessions were held with parents and one with educators to assess their knowledge of ELT delivery in their building, feedback about its effectiveness, and ideas that would heighten its impact on their children.

From the focus group sessions, we concluded that:

1. The majority of parents did not have a clear understanding of what ELT specifically meant for their child, but did associate that its purpose was to improve student outcomes and required an addition of some form to the school day.
2. Parents had a strong desire to be engaged in their children’s education. Parents had valuable ideas about the way educational opportunities should be delivered, and how the needs of students should be addressed. However, few of these parents were provided opportunities by the school or the district, for their participation in the ELT planning.

3. Parents and educators supported the idea of ELT and believed the children were benefiting in some capacity; however they believed that the quality and intensity of the subject matter of ELT varied based on school, grade and program provider.
4. More than half of the parents were not satisfied with the kinds of ELT programs offered to their children. Patterns of dissatisfaction were seen across schools. Almost all parents and educators shared a desire to see more leadership, arts, cultural, and social development opportunities.
5. The majority of educators did not believe that the schools had the resources to fully implement a strong ELT program, and were concerned that the limited number of seats for students in the afterschool programs made it difficult to serve all who would benefit from additional academic and/or social programs.

The Parents as Partners in Extended Learning Time Project

As a result of our focus group sessions, ALI organized the *Abbott Leadership Institute Parents as Partners in Extended Learning Time* leadership team.

The parents worked with ALI to increase parent engagement in ELT in Newark Public Schools by bridging the communication gap between parents and administrators, by becoming “ELT experts” and by sharing their vision for an extended school day with school leaders. Over the course of a year and a half, the parent leaders studied national best practices in ELT delivery, gathered parent feedback on extended day programs at their schools, brought more opportunities into schools for parents and students, and are now better able to hold school leaders accountable for ensuring an equitable distribution of resources for district wide reforms.

We learned two important lessons quickly:

1. Some schools had a minimal level of parent participation; however most parents reported having gone to one meeting and receiving letters delivered by their students. On the parent feedback survey, 78% of parents reported that they had not been asked to give feedback on ELT, and 75% reported that they were not invited to participate in the planning process.

2. In the majority of schools visited, the ELT programs were not much different from the standard school day. In the schools where ELT programs were more robust with an array of student supports, enrichment programs and arts initiatives, parents were more informed and also had a more favorable opinion of the ELT program.

Why Parent Engagement in School Reform Matters



We began looking for ways to engage parents more fully in their children’s education, to become more effective participants in the improvement of schools using ELT, national best practices and our own work in effective parent engagement gleaned from over 14 years of experience in Newark schools, augmented by our work with the PPELT parents. The Abbott Leadership Institute hereby presents *“Strategies for Parent Engagement in Extended Learning Time.”* We hope that this document will be used by school leaders and districts to ensure that parents are authentically engaged in not only the implementation of an extended school day, but also any efforts intended to improve the educational outcomes of their children.

Strategies for Parent Engagement in Extended Learning Time

Effective parent engagement in ELT, and any school reform initiative, must seek to *Educate, Engage and Empower* parents to partner in the planning and implementation of an extended school day. We assume parents must be permanent partners with a seat at the table based on four realities. Engaged parents are: (1) better able to support their children at home, in a way that is aligned to the goals of the extended learning time program; (2) the best champions for schools and the school district,

and are better able to solicit support and buy-in from other parents; (3) better able to collectively bring resources into the school/district, and serve as effective advocates for these schools; and (4) more likely to hold schools and districts accountable for planning and implementation of school reform.

We urge that the process of developing parent partners proceed in three stages of development.



EDUCATE PARENTS IN EXTENDED LEARNING TIME

Prior to implementing an ELT initiative, the district and/or school must provide extensive opportunities for parents to become familiar with nationally recognized and promising local practices, and accountability measures that can be used to determine if the extended school day is producing positive results for students. This means that planning must occur at least one year in advance of implementation, and parents must be provided multiple opportunities both at the school and in the community to learn about ELT.

Parent Education in Extended Learning Time should include:

1. An assessment of students' needs at each school, in conjunction with school leadership;
2. Information and training in promising practices from across the nation, many of which can be found in reports such as the More and Better Learning Time Report from the Annenberg Institute;
3. An introduction to local schools and other districts where ELT has been implemented and positive results achieved in the areas of overall student development, engagement and academic performance;
4. An examination of how the school/district intends to measure success;

5. Conversations that allow parents to provide feedback and present ideas concerning all of the above.

Examples of ways schools and school districts can educate parents in ELT:

- ✓ **Host multiple educational sessions on ELT for parents and** partner with community organizations to host sessions. Ensure that these sessions are well planned; offer refreshments and childcare, if possible. Keep a record of the number of parents reached, including contact information. Those parents should be communicated with regularly.
- ✓ **Create fact sheets about ELT** and share them with the school community. Make them accessible online, via email and handouts. On the fact sheets, offer opportunities for parents to participate.
- ✓ **Have information tables at every school event** throughout the year where parents are expected to attend.
- ✓ **Offer a feedback form at the end of every parent information session** to assess the quality of the presentation.



ENGAGE PARENTS IN THE PLANNING PROCESS

Now that parents have been provided various opportunities to become educated in ELT, districts must also seek opportunities to engage parents in the planning and implementation of the extended school day. Engagement strategies are varied and must be ongoing. Oftentimes, districts attempt to

solicit parent feedback once the reform plan has already been finalized. This makes parents distrusting of the process and less likely to see their ideas take shape. Parents must be engaged in a way that is sincere and their efforts respected.

Parent Engagement Opportunities should include:

1. Positions on planning committees at the district and school level with opportunities to be engaged in all aspects of ELT planning and implementation. Parents need to be included in determining focus areas and choosing after school program providers;
2. Opportunities for parents to give input and to talk to their children and engage them in the planning process by reporting their opinions and preferences to the school or district.

Examples of ways schools and school districts can engage parents in ELT:

- ✓ **Develop an ELT school/district planning committee and ensure parent representation.** If the school has a parent organization, they should also be invited to the table. The planning committee should consult with parents at all levels of planning and implementation, and incorporate their feedback into the school/district plan. The best made plans sometimes go awry. Parent input at the implementation stage can sometimes make things better.
- ✓ **Launch a survey for parents to give their ideas on how their child's school day should be spent.** Allow for parents to provide input on the programs needed and areas where their child would benefit from additional help. Incorporate questions for students to answer as well, on the parent survey.
- ✓ **Host regular school meetings to allow the planning committee to report to the school community and include how parent feedback has been incorporated.** Meetings where parents are allowed to be engaged by their own leaders are helpful in building a strong culture of parent engagement.

EMPOWER PARENTS IN THE PLANNING AND IMPLEMENTATION PROCESS



Parent leaders can be found in every school/district, and effective parent engagement in ELT should begin to help these leaders evolve. District officials and educators at all levels should not be afraid of the natural evolution of some parents beginning to feel more empowered as a result. Empowered parents will take responsibility to reach out to other parents, see that the ideas that came out of the planning process become implemented, develop partnerships with community groups and agencies to provide goods and services to the school, and advocate for the school and district ELT programs in the larger community, including the political decision makers.

Parent Empowerment Opportunities should include:

1. Support for the school parent organization.
2. Implementation of parent ideas and allowing a role for parents in the implementation process.
3. Opportunities to join in evaluating the success of the extended school day, and to make recommendations for improvement.
4. Invitation for parent leaders to solicit community resources and achieve “wins” for their children and the school/district by supplementing what the school has to offer.

Examples of ways schools and school districts can engage through empowerment:

- ✓ **Provide ongoing training and development in ELT for parent leaders,** in cooperation with community based parent training organizations, like the Abbott Leadership Institute.
- ✓ **Plan site visits to schools where ELT programs are promising,** and allow parents to learn firsthand along with educators and school

administrators, with the understanding that they will have the power to implement promising strategies in their school.

- ✓ **Provide opportunities for parent leaders to educate and engage other parents.**
- ✓ **Ask parent leaders** to participate in developing indicators for success and conducting observations, class and program visits, and making recommendations for improvement.
- ✓ **Encourage parent leaders to identify community partners and resources** that can help the school/district meet student and parent needs, and allow them to develop relationships on behalf of the school.
- ✓ **Consider community partnerships that will also empower parents to meet their own**, such as training and job readiness programs, health initiatives, and parent advocacy development.

Newark Parent Accomplishments

In Newark, the parent leadership team launched a citywide ELT Parent Feedback Survey, as a measurable way to determine parent knowledge and engagement, and to provide an opportunity for parents to give feedback. Ten parent leaders were responsible for facilitating the collection of 400 surveys across nine schools (the majority of responses came from 4 schools where parent leaders were more effective in developing school partnerships to solicit return of the surveys).

As a result of the parent surveys, interviews, school visits and trainings, the ALI parent leadership team developed the *Newark Parent's Vision for Extended Learning Time*. They released their vision to the NPS School Board, the Superintendent, district political representatives and the community. From the meeting, district representative from the NPS Office of Expanded Learning Time agreed to work with ALI parents to create accountability measures that will lead to greater equity across schools. In addition, ALI has developed a new partnership with the NPS Office of Community Engagement to train their staff in effective parent engagement strategies. We will also host parent workshops to help them implement the strategies when requested, and train parents to improve their effectiveness.

Challenges to Parent Engagement

While we believe parent engagement is critical to any school reform efforts, we also understand that many school administrators and parent leaders for that matter, believe that attempts to engage parents can be threatening and disheartening. Some educators are reluctant to think of parents as insightful members of the school education team. Studies have shown that engaging parents in the school provides the best chances for buy-in, and success. There are many factors that affect parent engagement: the parent's perspective of the school (whether it is deemed to be parent friendly or not); cultural perspectives (diverging beliefs about the role parents should play in education); time availability; lack of knowledge (communication tactics employed by school officials); the parent's demographics (education, marital status, race, and economic condition).

Considering all these variables, there are some parents who will develop an understanding of the need to carve out a space for themselves at this new table, around which educational progress can be made. It will never be possible to engage every parent, but schools and school districts can work to eliminate barriers to parent engagement. The key to effective parent engagement is consistency and the strategies provided here within the context of education, engagement and empowerment naturally provide that. Schools must be willing to change their beliefs concerning parent engagement and embark upon the journey with the idea that meaningful parent engagement is possible and critical to student success. School reform cannot work without parents. Parent engagement is worth the effort, and when a priority, shows great results. Parents are the best champions for schools. Educate, Engage and Empower them, and students will thrive.



Educate, Engage, and Empower: Summary of Strategies



Across the nation, school districts are exploring the possibilities of meeting students' needs, both academic and non-academic, by extending the school day. The implementation of an extended school day provides districts such as Newark, with a critical opportunity to engage parents in a meaningful way. These strategies can be used by school leaders and district administrators to ensure that parents are educated, engaged and empowered to serve as partners in the process.

EDUCATE PARENTS IN THE GOALS, BEST PRACTICES, AND BENEFITS OF IMPLEMENTING AN EXTENDED LEARNING TIME INITIATIVE FOR STUDENTS

- ✓ **Host multiple educational sessions on ELT for parents and** partner with community organizations to host sessions. Ensure that these sessions are well planned; offer refreshments and childcare, if possible. **Create fact sheets about ELT** and share them with the school community. Make them accessible online, via email and handouts. On the fact sheets, offer opportunities for parents to participate.
- ✓ **Have information tables at** every school event throughout the year where parents are expected to attend.
- ✓ **Offer a feedback form at the end of every parent information session** to assess the quality of the presentation.

ENGAGE PARENTS IN THE PROCESS OF REIMAGINING THE SCHOOL DAY

- ✓ **Develop an ELT school/district planning committee and ensure parent representation.** If the school has a parent organization, they should also be invited to the table.
- ✓ **Launch a survey for parents to give their ideas on how their child's school day should be spent.** Allow for parents to provide input on the programs needed and areas where their child would benefit from additional help.
- ✓ **Host regular school meetings to allow the planning committee to report to the school community and include how parent feedback has been incorporated.** Meetings where parents are allowed to be engaged by their own leaders are helpful in building a strong culture of parent engagement.

EMPOWER PARENTS TO MAKE DECISIONS ABOUT EXTENDED LEARNING TIME IMPLEMENTATION

- ✓ **Provide ongoing training and development in ELT for parent leaders,** in cooperation with community based parent training organizations, like the Abbott Leadership Institute.
- ✓ **Plan site visits to schools where ELT programs are promising,** and allow parents to learn firsthand along with educators and school administrators, with the understanding that they will have the power to implement promising strategies in their school.
- ✓ **Provide opportunities for parent leaders to educate and engage other parents.**
- ✓ **Ask parent leaders** to participate in developing indicators for success and conducting observations, class and program visits, and making recommendations for improvement.
- ✓ **Encourage parent leaders to identify community partners and resources** that can help the school/district meet student and parent needs, and allow them to develop relationships on behalf of the school.
- ✓ **Consider community partnerships that will also empower parents to meet their own,** such as training and job readiness programs, health initiatives, and parent advocacy development.