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Parent Leadership Action Forum Facilitator's Guide

The following participatory exercises were part of PLAN's November 20, 2004 Forum, "Transforming Parent School Relationships." Justice Matters Institute (JMI) developed these exercises in collaboration with staff members from PLAN, Parent Services Project, and the Northern California Citizenship Project. We encourage you to adapt any of these exercises to the work you are doing to promote parent engagement for school improvement.

I. Parent Skit

The idea is to present two skits, one that portrays a bad version of parent-school relationships, and one that portrays a good version. The goal is to get the audience thinking about their own experiences with parent-school interactions. The skit will be followed by audience participants raising their hands if they experienced the same experience, some folks will sharing what happened in their situation, and we will connect the stories by making a "web" with a ball of yarn.

Time: 10 minutes

Cast: 3-7 parents to play the different roles

Set up: Actors sit in chairs in front of audience.

Names of characters and the plot can be adapted to better reflect the experiences of your group.

Scene 1

Narrator: Scene one takes place in the school office.

Secretary: *(Seated, going through papers.)*

Parent: *(Standing, looking at secretary, hoping to catch her eye. After several moments, parent clears her throat.)*

Parent: Excuse Me.

Secretary: *(Finally looking up.)* Yes?

Parent: I have a meeting with Mrs. Smith

Secretary: Her room is 105.

Parent: I went there and waited for a half hour, but no one is in the room.

Secretary: I don't know where she is.

Parent: I guess I'll go over there again. I hope she's there, because I can't take time off of work again.

Narrator: Scene two takes place in the teacher's classroom.

Parent: *(walks up to teacher)*: Mrs. Smith, you're here.

Teacher: Mrs. Johnson, your son has not turned in any of his assignments this semester. He may not pass this class.

Parent: What?! Why didn't I hear about this sooner?

Teacher: I have a list of all of the assignments. He has one week to get them in. I don't know if you have a quiet place for him to study in your house or if you emphasize homework to him, but those are important things for you to do. I don't think he'll be able to get them in on time, but please see that he makes an effort.

Scene 2

Narrator: Once again, scene one takes place in the school office.

Secretary: *(Seated, looking through papers.)*

Parent: *(walks up.)*

Secretary: *(Looks up)* Good afternoon. Can I help you?

Parent: I have a meeting with Mrs. Smith. I went to her room and waited for a half hour, but no one was in the room.

Secretary: Oh, I'm very sorry about that. Let me page her, and see if I can find her. Please have a seat.

Narrator: Scene two is in the teacher's classroom.

Teacher: Mrs. Smith, I am so sorry that you had to wait. I had bus duty after school today, and one of the buses were late, and I had to wait with the students. I hope I didn't inconvenience you too much.

Parent: A little bit, but not too much.

Teacher: I do apologize. How are you? And how is your baby daughter? Is she walking yet?

Parent: Yes, I have to run after her all the time now, and she's wearing me out.

(Parent and teacher laugh.)

Teacher: Have a seat. I am so glad you could meet with me, because I am worried about Jonathon and I wanted to get your input.

Parent: What is going on?

Teacher: Well, he hasn't been turning in the first few assignments of the semester. Have you noticed anything about what might be going on with him?

Parent: Well, he is usually very good about finishing his school work when he feels he understands what is happening in class. But when he doesn't know what is going on, sometimes he gives up.

Teacher: So maybe he isn't understanding what we're doing right now. Maybe I can give him some one-on-one time in class.

Parent: I don't know if you should do that. He gets very embarrassed about anything that might make him look like he needs extra help. He is worried that his friends will think he is stupid. Is there a way you could work with him privately without the other students finding out?

Teacher: If he can get here twenty minutes before school starts, I can work with him then.

Parent: Let's try it.

Follow-up Discussion

Facilitator asks people what they noticed about the skit. What were some of the key differences? Facilitator briefly introduces the idea of values into the discussion, the values that were shaping what was happening in each skit.

II. Web of Collective Experience Exercise

This exercise can be adapted to a number of situations. It can begin with one participant's story, a skit, film, or some other expression of a shared experience.

Set up: Participants stand in a circle

Materials needed: Large ball of colored string or yarn

Time needed: 20-40 minutes, depending on the number of stories shared.

A. Making a web of collective experience

Facilitator asks participants to raise their hands if they have ever had an experience similar to the (story, skit, etc.). (Note: if more than one experience is shared at the beginning, you can add: "Raise your hands if you ever had an experience similar to the second skit. Raise your hands if you have had both types of experiences.")

Facilitator picks one of people with raised hand, asks if they can share what happened. Then, facilitator asks the person to hold the end of a string. Facilitator points to another person in another part of the room who has raised his or her hand, takes the string over to them, asks them to tell their story. Facilitator helps connect the web to other raised hands, with each person taking the string sharing a story. (Facilitator might choose to limit the number of stories, depending on the time available for the activity.)

Throughout the activity, the facilitator and other group members connect string to all the people who had shared stories – or raised their hands to indicate shared experience with the story. In this way, participants form a web.

C. Analyzing the web

The purpose of this part of the exercise is to help participants see that the experience they shared is part of a larger, systemic problem. Depending on who is in the group, these questions may need to be adjusted.

Facilitator asks:

"Do the people in this web all have children with the same teacher?

Do the people in this web all have children with the same principal?

Do the people in this web all have children in the same district?

If the problem isn't in one teacher, one principal, one school, or one district, where is it?

What does it mean that so many parents have this experience?"

Schools need for parents to be involved in helping to solve these problems, but often discourage parent participation.

Questions and observations to wrap up:

Can we use the web that connects parents, the fact that so many parents have the same experiences, to be a web of empowerment? Can we use our connection to each other to start to turn some of these problems around? Watch what happens when one of us drops our connection to the web.

III. School Inequity Exercise:

Time: 10-15 minutes

Materials needed:

1. Two signs: “School system A. Student population: White, middle income, born in U.S.” “School System B. Student population: African American, Latino, Asian, low-income, immigrants.”
2. Scroll
3. Books
4. Handout with some facts about inequitable opportunities (optional)

Set up:

Volunteers

Facilitator (F) asks for 20 people to stand up and help with activity. F divides the group in half.

Schools

F explains that half are the students of School System A, and asks them to go stand by their sign (which is posted on the wall). The other half are students of School System B and they are asked to stand by their sign. F asks a volunteer from each group to read what their sign says about the students who are in their school system.

Teachers

F says, “Here are your teachers.” Two pre-selected volunteers come out. Teacher with scroll stands by School System A. Teacher without scroll stands by School System B. F asks School System A teacher, what the scroll is. The teacher explains, “It’s my credential.” F asks what a teaching credential is. “It means I took courses for being a teacher and I practiced teaching while an experienced teacher supervised me.” F asks School System B teacher why he or she doesn’t have a scroll. “Because I don’t have a credential.”

Books

F says, “Here are your books.” Gives School System A 10 books. Gives School System B 5 or fewer books. F tells students in School System B, “You’ll have to share.”

Outcomes

F asks, “At the end of going through the school system, how do students from each school do?” F can take a prediction from the group.

F tells about who will graduate from high schools. F asks two members of School System A to sit down because they didn’t graduate. Four members from School System B are asked to sit down because they didn’t graduate.

Then F tells about who will be able to go to a four year college that is part of the California University System. F explains that in order to be accepted by a four year college, students have to take and pass certain academic courses. F tells 5 more students

from School System A to sit down because they haven't met the requirements for going to a university. F tells four members from School System B to sit down. Of the remaining two that are left in School System B, one of them must stand on one foot to show how many students are eligible to go to the university.

Wrapping Up

Those remaining show how each school system prepared their students to graduate and be ready for college. Neither school system is doing as good a job as it should be, but A is clearly giving students a better education than B.

Facilitator can hand out the Justice Matters Institute Fact Sheet about poor opportunities and outcomes for students of color contrasted with opportunities and outcomes for white, middle class students. (A copy of the fact sheet is attached.) Without going through the sheet, the facilitator explains that it has more detailed information on inequalities between schools.

F: School systems have a pattern of not providing a good education to students of color. There is something very wrong here. Our voices are needed to make a difference.