



March 27, 2014

To: Samuel E. Brown, Director of Desegregation  
Tucson Unified School District

From: Margit Birge, Region IX Equity Assistance Center at WestEd

Re: Family and Community Engagement Plan

Thank you for asking me to review and provide feedback on the Tucson Unified Family and Community Engagement Plan. I am impressed by the work you've done to gather data on your current programs and practices, and design a comprehensive districtwide plan to engage families. You've used well-respected research from the Harvard Family Research Project and the National Network of Partnership Schools at Johns Hopkins University, and I applaud your effort to shift the district work from involvement to engaging families in "learning-centric" opportunities. I found some areas of the plan that could use elaboration and some areas that could be changed, which I'll explain below.

In my work with districts, I emphasize the importance of building the capacity of both educators and of families, to enable them to work as partners for student success and well-being. The description of the SAIL professional development modules, and the goal to "provide tools for educators to welcome, build relationships, and offer information and experiences which families are personally interested in" sounds very promising. In order to ensure the successful implementation of this professional development, I would recommend elaborating the following:

- How will the SAIL professional development (PD) fit into the overall professional development plans of the district?
- How will the SAIL PD be rolled out to different schools and to different groups of employees, e.g. administrators, teachers, classified staff, counselors, etc.?
- How will the SAIL PD be funded?
- What will be the follow-up to the SAIL PD, e.g. site-level PD across employee-groups, within employee groups?
- Who will conduct follow-up PD at school sites?
- How will employees be held accountable to implement the SAIL practices?
- How will you monitor and evaluate the implementation and the impact of SAIL practices?

In my work I also emphasize the importance of building partnerships at the site-level, and specifically establishing teams of educators and parents who will lead the family engagement work at that site. This follows the model of the National Networks of Partnership Schools that train Action Teams for Partnerships at their sites, and the



leadership teams that coordinate the Academic Parent Teacher Teams at sites. In your plan, I would recommend having the Student and Family Support Liaison coordinate a leadership team for family engagement at each site.

I would also recommend elaborating and clarifying the role and responsibilities of the site-based Student and Family Support Liaisons. The definition on page 3 is very general, and the sentence “provides activities to meet academic needs of targeted students” isn’t clear whether that means working with students or with families. I’ve often seen the liaisons at school sites become another adult to provide supervision or tutoring for students, and while those duties may be helpful, it makes it hard for the liaison to focus on building the capacity of educators and families to work as partners. Several other aspects of the Student and Family Support Liaisons could benefit from clarification:

- Who will supervise and evaluate the liaisons, i.e. the site administrator or the district Family Engagement Coordinator?
- Which sites will have a Student and Family Liaison and which will have a Community Representative, and how are their roles different?
- Who will determine which sites have one or the other position?

One of the important foundations for building relationships with families is to promote and provide opportunities for two-way communication between families and educators. While families need information about the education system and their role, the current plan seems to emphasize one-way sending of information or providing training to families without also having a dialogue about how educators and families can work together to support students. Again, the best place to have these dialogues in my experience is at the site and classroom level. For example, the Academic Parent Teacher Team (APTT) model can be a vehicle to promote that dialogue. However, APTT requires a substantial commitment to professional development for teachers and administrators, so I would carefully consider how that will fit with the other initiatives in the plan, how it would be rolled out in the district, what the accountability would be for sites, etc..

A major initiative in the plan is to rename and expand the existing Family Centers. I’m interested in understanding which needs of families will be addressed by the Centers, and whether you have information from Tucson Unified or other districts that indicate community-based Family Centers will be the best way to meet those needs. We know that the foundation for successful family engagement is building trusting relationships between educators and families. In my experience, it is easier to build those relationships at the school site level, where families have an ongoing relationship with the teachers, staff and administrators, rather than at a district or community level. One alternative would be to establish parent centers at each school site, providing a place for parents to meet and network with each other, have access to computers and the internet, meet with the Student and Family Support Liaison, principal or other school staff, etc. (I also noticed in the plan that the new name of the Centers is used towards the bottom of page 16, before the name change is explained at the top of page 18).



Lastly, many successful districts have a cabinet-level position of Family Engagement Coordinator (FEC). I would encourage you to ensure that family engagement work is embedded in all initiatives and activities of the district, and that the FEC has access to the superintendent and the cabinet on a regular basis. We know that effective family engagement can have a big impact on student academic success and well-being, as long as it is an integral part of the district's work in all areas.

I would be happy to discuss these ideas with you further by phone, and again thank you for asking me to provide feedback on your plan. I wish you the best as you move forward to strengthen family engagement in Tucson Unified.