



NATIONAL RESOURCE CENTER ON
**CHARTER
SCHOOL**
FINANCE & GOVERNANCE

PROMISING PRACTICE PROFILE

Enhancing Charter Schools through Parent Involvement

Amy Biehl High School, Community Montessori, East Mountain High School, Florida Consortium of Public Charter Schools, Pacific Collegiate School, Taos Charter School, and Timpanogos Academy

SUMMARY Charter school laws in numerous states require charter schools to involve the parent community. However, most laws require only peripheral participation, such as garnering parent support for the school during the application process or keeping parents informed of student performance. These participation requirements do not take full advantage of charter schools' potential to draw on the knowledge and expertise of their parent community. In response, some charter schools have taken a proactive approach by establishing programs that incorporate parent involvement systemically into school operations. In this promising practice profile, the National Resource Center on Charter School Finance and Governance highlights innovative methods for harnessing meaningful parent involvement. Practices range from creating a parent governing board to requiring parent participation at school events. In each case, parents play an active role in school decision-making, taking on responsibilities that include school financing, facilities acquisition, and accountability for student learning.

Promising Practice in:

- Charter School Finance
- Charter School Governance

Implemented by:

- State Policymaker
- Charter Authorizer
- Charter Operator
- Other

Inside:

- Implementation Details
- Impact
- Lessons Learned
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BACKGROUND Many charter schools are established by parents who want to create an alternative to traditional public schools or aim to become involved in their child's education, so it is often assumed that fostering interest in parent involvement is not difficult. As schools of choice, charter schools offer parents a unique form of involvement from the time they decide their child will attend the school. Nevertheless, many charter schools are uncertain about how best to make use of the resources that parents can offer. A 2007 survey of charter school leaders found that parent involvement was one area about which leaders felt the least confident, with "nearly 23 percent of new



administrators admitting that they did not feel confident engaging parents.”¹

The charter schools profiled here go beyond the traditional and peripheral ways to involve parents. They all benefit from strong parent support and, in some cases, parents have championed the school prior to the charter award. Several of the schools, such as East Mountain High School and Community Montessori, incorporate parent involvement in their mission statement. In every case, the profiled charter schools have created mutually beneficial relationships with parents; the parents contribute time to help enhance the school, and the school offers parents something in return.

This promising practice profile describes the parent involvement strategies of these charter schools:

- Amy Biehl High School—family meetings and exhibitions;
- Community Montessori—“Parent Involvement Partnership” meetings;
- East Mountain High School—parent volunteering requirement;
- Florida Consortium of Public Schools—Parent Coffee Hour;
- Pacific Collegiate School—online catalog of parent volunteer opportunities;
- Taos Charter School—parent fundraising organization; and
- Timpanogos Academy—parent-elected charter board.

IMPLEMENTATION DETAILS

Parent involvement in charter schools can be characterized by the type of activity (e.g., education-related or fundraising); by the time commitment (e.g., the frequency of events or mandated volunteer hours); and by the nature of the involvement (e.g., formal committee meetings or informal gatherings).

Type of Activity

With diverse parent populations, the charter schools highlighted in this promising practice profile offer opportuni-

ties for all parents to be involved, regardless of whether they work full time or are single parents. The strategies range from involving the entire parent community to having individual parents assume specific roles (see Strategies to Generate Strong Parent Involvement). For example, [Timpanogos Academy](#) in Utah has parents elect the charter board, making the board directly accountable to them. The school is governed by a seven-member board of directors. Parents elected to the board also serve as the community council for the school, which makes decisions on trust lands money and school improvement planning. Each board of director position lasts three years after the initial term, and the positions are elected in a staggered rotation with approximately two seats elected each year. The Timpanogos Academy charter provides for representative governance, which mandates responsiveness to constituent concerns. If parents believe any board member is not performing in the school’s best interest, a recall provision is written into the charter.

[Taos Charter School](#) in New Mexico relies on its parent community for fundraising. The Friends of Taos Charter School, a parent group formed as a nonprofit organization to raise money for the school, was able to access funds for school facilities; charter schools in New Mexico cannot obtain loans directly. The parents also convinced a local developer to donate seven acres to the school and participated in the school’s landscaping design and architecture. Parents garnered additional publicity for the school when they asked the governor to speak at an event and announce he would be requesting a \$1 million appropriation for a school building. Although the legislature ultimately did not approve the proposed appropriation, the school still benefited from the publicity generated by the mayor’s support.

Several charter schools with promising parent involvement practices have active parent groups that meet weekly or monthly to assess school needs and determine how they can contribute. For example, [Community Montessori](#) parents can chair one of six different committees, including publicity and facility management. The school offers parent workshops and trainings specific to the committee on which they serve. [Pacific Collegiate](#) sponsors about 17 parent education events each year, using both outside and in-house experts from the school or the parent population. The experts lead programs focusing on topics (e.g., child development, school governance, and education reform) that help prepare parents to serve in decision-making roles at the school. This has resulted in almost 15,000 hours of

¹ See Gross, B. and K. M. Pochop (2007). Leadership to Date, Leadership Tomorrow: A Review of Data on Charter School Directors. NCSRP working paper # 2007-2 Seattle, WA: Center on Reinventing Public Education.



parent service. [Amy Biehl High School](#) has monthly parent committee meetings to help target parent involvement efforts. In one instance, the parents successfully lobbied local government to change zoning laws to allow for a new school facility in downtown Albuquerque.

Strategies to Generate Strong Parent Involvement

To generate strong parent involvement, charter schools can pursue these strategies:

- Provide a walk through of the school to welcome parents and build connections among teachers, administrators, parents, and community members;
- Hold two family involvement activities each quarter to keep parent involvement ongoing;
- Exhibit student work in the school and broader community;
- Survey parents about their goals for their children and then help them reach those goals through parent education; and,
- Develop a “job description” of an involved parent to help parents understand how they can best participate in their child’s education.

Source: Adapted from Henderson, A. T., Johnson, V., Mapp, K. L., and Davies, D. (2007). *Beyond the bake sale: The essential guide to family-school partnerships*. New York, NY: New Press.

Time Commitments

Some schools require a specific amount of time that parents must contribute to the school or must spend attending school-sponsored programs. Pacific Collegiate requests 40 hours per year per family. To advertise as well as monitor parent involvement activities, the school created a Web site that lists various volunteer opportunities; parents choose how they would like to be involved. The Web site includes a description of each activity, the contact person, and the hours required. The online system also enables parents to report their hours as they complete them. Another charter school, Community Montessori, requires a parent work commitment of 10 hours per year; included are hours spent running outreach programs, recruiting new students, and serving as support staff for classroom teachers. In addition to the 10-hour requirement, the school has created

what it calls a “Parent Involvement Partnership,” in which parents meet once per month for “studio sit-downs” with other parents and advisors to discuss child development-related topics. This activity exemplifies how charter schools can structure parent involvement as a mutually beneficial endeavor, one that is good for the school and good for the parents.

[East Mountain High](#) in New Mexico requires 72 hours of volunteerism per year, or a monthly financial donation of \$50 in lieu of volunteering. Some parents run the concessions for the minor league baseball team, a program that generated \$20,000 in one year for the school, while others work on the Memorial Garden. East Mountain High also relies on parents to run its athletic program, making it one of the few charter schools with a competitive athletic program.

Nature of the Involvement

As a condition of enrollment, Amy Biehl High School requires parents to attend family meetings and exhibitions. During family meetings, which are held at the school during the evening, each family (parents and student) meets with the dean and an advisor who has been trained by a social worker. Together they discuss the student’s strengths and areas he or she needs to improve. If the student is having difficulty, the discussion is a way for the student, parents, and staff to begin working on a plan to address the issues. In contrast to traditional parent-teacher conferences in which the student is the point of discussion, family meetings at Amy Biehl are student-directed; the student is the facilitator, taking an active role in directing conversation rather than being the topic of conversation. Similarly, the Amy Biehl school community considers exhibitions as high-stakes public assessments. Student work is on display at the school and critiqued in an interactive forum involving parents, teachers, and students. Tony Montefilleto, Amy Biehl High’s executive director, indicates the family meetings and exhibitions play an important role in building the culture of the school and situating parents and students as change agents in students’ learning. Parents are required to attend both functions; if they fail to do so, their child cannot enroll for the following year until the requirements are met.

On a more social level, the Florida Consortium of Public Charter Schools offers an informal Parent Coffee Hour each month in which parents meet before school with faculty and staff to share information and raise concerns. Director Robert Haag reports that because the setting

is informal, parents feel comfortable sharing concerns in an open and nonconfrontational manner. Moreover, this practice prevents issues from escalating; complaints are addressed quickly and on a personal level. Although the coffee hour is not mandatory, Haag notes that parent attendance and satisfaction with the meetings is high throughout the year.

IMPACT

All the schools employing these promising practices report high levels of parent involvement. At Amy Biehl, where the school will not enroll a student for the next year until the parents have participated in both a family meeting and an exhibition, parent involvement is 100 percent. Community Montessori reports that approximately 90 percent of its parents are involved in various programs; positive impacts include an increased sense of ownership among parents and a stronger sense of community. Through the Parent Coffee Hour at the Florida Consortium of Public Charter Schools, issues that might undermine the community if left unattended are raised through casual discussion. The meetings help foster congenial relationships between teachers and parents outside the classroom.

The public support and recognition charter schools gain through parent involvement is also noteworthy. According to Nancy O'Bryan, director of Taos Charter School, parents "rallied to get the governor to attend the opening of the school." Parent volunteers also increase the number and skills of people who can contribute to school operations. In addition, through their participation, parents become more knowledgeable about and committed to school initiatives, especially if they have been involved in their creation. This reciprocal impact—benefits to the parents as well as the school—can be seen in all the profiled charter schools.

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For students, parent involvement can help increase personal accountability and learning opportunities. Amy Biehl's education program requires all students to take two courses at the local community college during their senior year. Students report feeling very prepared for college courses, largely because they have had "exhibitions" of their high school work during which parents and staff questioned

them about their challenges and accomplishments. Finally, parent volunteers help expand the learning opportunities for charter school students by, for example, staffing athletic teams, advanced math classes, and community outreach programs.

LESSONS LEARNED

Implementation Challenges

One challenge charter schools may experience in creating parent involvement programs is how to sustain parent interest in volunteering over the long term. Schools in low socioeconomic neighborhoods may have difficulty requiring parents, especially those heading single-parent homes who must work irregular hours or more than one job, to continually invest many hours while their child attends the charter school. Paying a fee in lieu of volunteering, such as at East Mountain High, may also dissuade families that are struggling financially. In addition, some states prohibit charter schools from imposing a fee of this nature. Being upfront with parents, early on and often, about their roles and responsibilities as members of the school community is essential not only for student success, but also to the charter school's survival as a school of choice.

Some of the programs and practices involve a large investment of time and dedication, not just from the parents, but also from faculty and staff. In some instances, this has led charter schools to add staff. Amy Biehl High School, for example, hired a parent liaison to maintain regular communication between parents and faculty. The national network of Accelerated Schools has parent committees that monitor parent commitment and involvement. Also important is the idea that faculty members are expected to keep in close contact with parents. To encourage such partnering, schools often build time into the work week to reduce teacher burnout. Amy Biehl High School suspends regular classes on certain days to give teachers time to train with the social worker and dean for family meetings. Teachers and students also use this time to prepare for their exhibitions.

Finally, monitoring and enforcement of parent involvement requirements can be difficult. Pacific Collegiate has an automated system that enables parents to log in their participatory hours; however, no consequences exist if a family does not fulfill its requirements. Principal Andrew Goldenkranz cautions that if personal relationships

between school staff and parents are not developed, the hours become a compliance issue rather than a collaborative effort to enhance the school. Parent politics can also be a challenge if some parents believe they are contributing while others are not. Although Amy Biehl denies enrollment to students whose parents do not attend the mandatory four meetings, most other schools do not monitor or explicitly enforce parent involvement requirements. East Mountain High School does not monitor whether parents' service hours are completed or whether the fee is paid; instead, parents are expected to monitor themselves. According to Goldenkranz, schools need to assume that parents who choose to be part of the charter community will do what is expected. However, even with very supportive parent environments, most schools do not have 100 percent parent involvement; this percentage could greatly decrease in less supportive communities.

Keys to Success

A high caliber of parents and teachers who assume active roles as parent involvement facilitators is one key to success, according to leaders of the profiled charter schools. Many of these parents and teachers take it upon themselves to be change agents for the school. They participate on committees and promote academic and extracurricular programs. Dedicated parents and teachers provide the human capital to make things happen for the school. Having parents and teachers who are determined to keep motivation high and ensure plans are implemented is essential. This is not limited to a single well-intentioned individual; collaboration and ongoing communication between parents and teachers is required to create a sense of community. In some cases, teachers support parent involvement by attending events and acknowledging the importance of parental involvement. In other cases, school missions that explicitly point out the importance of parent involvement may boost parents' motivation to participate. Barbara Burke-Fondren, director of Community Montessori, reports that her school supports parent involvement by adhering to a philosophy of "parents are the students' primary teacher." Regardless of the approach, the profiled charter schools worked to enhance parents' experiences with the school, often through parent education and increased access to teachers. In this way, the benefits of parent involvement flow two ways—between the parents and the school and the school and the parents.

A clear sense of direction is another factor leaders of the profiled charter schools believe is key to success. When goals are clear, parent participation efforts are focused. Results can be observed and accountability increases. Charter schools often communicate their expectations for the community by using parent contracts and emphasizing the importance of parent involvement in their mission statement. It is also not unusual for charter schools to hold an orientation meeting for families interested in enrolling their children in the charter school to educate them about mutual responsibilities—what the school will do for their children and what the families need to do for the school. Such approaches help ensure the entire school community is working together as a team toward a particular vision.

Appreciation is also important for sustaining parent involvement over the long term. Leaders of the profiled schools say that when parents' efforts are acknowledged, the relationships become more collaborative and institutionalized. East Mountain High School sends out thank-you letters to let parents know their efforts are appreciated. Pacific Collegiate, in thanking parents for their contributions, emphasizes how parents' efforts have directly benefited the school.

ADDITIONAL COMMENTS

Although research on the benefits of parent involvement has not established a definitive correlation between parent involvement and student achievement, qualitative research suggests that students' performance improves when parents are actively involved in their school (see the section on Useful Resources). Anecdotally, all the profiled charter schools report a high student success rate.

In each of the profiled charter schools, parents believe they have a voice regarding their children's education. Moreover, the schools share a common aim of viewing parents as teachers. All the schools acknowledge that parents who are actively involved with the school play a large role in the development of the child. Therefore, the charter school must not only foster collaboration between teachers and parents, but also enhance the knowledge and expertise of both groups. Amy Biehl High has received a Coalition of Essential Schools grant to serve as a mentor school for other charters that want to follow the school's model of parent involvement.

Also noteworthy among the profiled charter schools is



that most of the promising practices in parent involvement require very little funding; they rely heavily on volunteers. Furthermore, many parent involvement activities help generate supplemental funds for charter schools, which compared with traditional public schools tend to be under-financed and underresourced. A few of the profiled charter schools have small budgets for parent involvement that include funding to train teachers and parents on how to work together or to train them in the specific skills they need to get their jobs done.

USEFUL RESOURCES

Survey results showing high parent satisfaction at East Mountain High School: <http://www.eastmountainhigh.net/survey/SurveyResultsAPS-EMHS-06-07.doc>.

The online parent volunteer catalog at Pacific Collegiate: <http://pacificcollegiate.com/dcpage.cfm?PageBaselD=50138>.

The online form for parents to report their volunteer hours at Timpanogos Academy: <http://timpacademy.org/#reportHours>

Amy Biehl High School parent page: <http://abhs.k12.nm.us/parents.html>.

Description of Community Montessori's parent involvement program and online log for volunteer hours: <http://www.shiningminds.com/FamilyConnection.html>.

Research on the relationship between parent involvement and student outcomes:

- Epstein, J. (2001). *School, family, and community Partnerships: Preparing educators and improving schools*. Boulder, CO: Westview Press
- Hoover-Dempsey, K. V., Walker, J. M. T., Sandler, H. M., Whetsel, D., Green, C. L., Wilkins, A. S., et al. (2005). Why do parents become involved? Research findings and implications. *Elementary School Journal*, 2005: UChicago Press
- Marschall, M. (2006). Parent involvement and educational outcomes for Latino students. *The Review of Policy Research*, 23(5), 1053-1076.

Informational guide on creating strong parent involvement practices:

- Henderson, A. T., Johnson, V., Mapp, K. L., and Davies, D. (2007). *Beyond the bake sale: The essential guide to family-school partnerships*. New York, NY: New Press.

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This Profile is one in a series highlighting promising practices in charter school finance and governance implemented by state policymakers, charter authorizers, and charter operators across the country. This Profile was written by the Center on Educational Governance for the National Resource Center on Charter School Finance and Governance (NRC). Promising practices are selected from nominations received by the NRC on the basis of innovativeness, evidence of positive impact, and potential for transferability and usefulness. The NRC has not conducted program evaluations of the initiatives profiled and does not endorse particular policies, practices, or programs. For more information on this Profile, please contact the Center on Educational Governance at (213) 740-0697.

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