

Shared Decision-Making for District Leaders



BUILDING PEER-TO-PEER FAMILY NETWORKS

Learn specific strategies around Family Cafés, Study Circles and Academic Parent-Teacher Teams

Family Café

Drawing on seven integrated design principles, the World Caféⁱ methodology is a simple, effective, and flexible format for hosting large group dialogue.

World Café can be modified to meet a wide variety of needs. Specifics of context, numbers, purpose, location, and other circumstances are factored into each event's unique invitation, design, and question choice, but the following five components comprise the basic model:

1. Setting: Create a "special" environment, most often modeled after a café, i.e. small round tables covered with a checkered or white linen tablecloth, butcher block paper, colored pens, a vase of flowers, and optional "talking stick" item. There should be four chairs at each table (optimally) – and no more than five.
2. Welcome and Introduction: The host begins with a warm welcome and an introduction to the World Café process, setting the context, sharing the Cafe Etiquette, and putting participants at ease.



This resource is for district leaders to develop policies that support the implementation of the family engagement strategies.

Recommendations

- Implementation Settings
- District level meetings
 - Planned individual time

Planning Time: 30 minutes

Implementation Time: 30 minutes to read

Teachers can use this resource to support and inform each family's efforts to connect with other families in the school.

Principals can use this resource to gain an understanding of how to provide the means for family peer-to-peer networking within the school.

3. Small Group Rounds: The process begins with the first of three or more 20-minute rounds of conversation for the small group seated around a table. At the end of the 20 minutes, each member of the group moves to a new table. The group may or may not choose to have one person stay as the "table host" for the next round, welcoming the next group and briefly filling it in on what happened in the previous round.
4. Questions: Each round is prefaced with a question specially crafted for the specific context and desired purpose of the World Café. The same questions can be used for more than one round, or they can be built upon each other to focus the conversation or guide its direction.
5. Harvest: After the small groups (and/or in between rounds, as needed), individuals are invited to share insights or other results from their conversations with the rest of the large group. These results are reflected visually in a variety of ways, most often with graphic recording in the front of the room.

The basic process is simple and simple to learn, but complexities and nuances of context, numbers, question crafting and purpose can make it optimal to bring in an experienced host to help. If this is the case, professional consulting services and senior hosts are available

through World Cafe Services to talk about needs. In addition, there are many resources available for new World Cafe hosts, including a free hosting tool kit, an online community of practice, and World Cafe Signature Learning Programs.

Study Circles

The Study Circle modelⁱⁱ can be adapted to a whole-school or classroom process and used to address family engagement issues within the school that may be impacted and/or enhanced through a peer-to-peer process. This model is particularly effective in addressing issues through an equity lens.

Read this description below of a study circle started in the Montgomery County Schools that was specifically implemented to address the issues of race and culture and student achievement.ⁱⁱⁱ Think about how this process might be adapted at your school to address equity issues and support peer to peer relationships and more engagement in shared decision-making based on formative assessments.

- Because study circles are intentionally designed to bring diverse groups of participants together from different racial, cultural, linguistic, and socio-economic backgrounds to learn together, what special considerations would you make with your population of families to make this approach a success?
- Think about the possibility of conducting study circles in your classroom: what might you learn that could inform your own grade level's understanding of issues that families are concerned about and how might that information be used to inform shared decision-making?

Schools Enlist Hispanic Parents to Improve Parent Success

by Gloria Francesca Mengual

Educators and Hispanic parents in Montgomery County, Maryland schools have found a way to talk, listen, and act together for the benefit of children.

Faced with dramatic shifts in the student population in the county, educators began to see that the gap in student achievement was tied to the communication gap between schools and parents from different cultures and backgrounds.

Many newcomers find it hard to feel at home in the schools. Lourdes Chavez, who came to the United States from El Salvador 17 years ago, has three

The Study Circles Resource Center

The Study Circles Resource Center (SCRC) is dedicated to finding ways for people from diverse backgrounds, residing within the same communities, to engage in dialogue and problem solving centered on critical social and political issues. SCRC helps communities by giving them the tools to organize productive dialogue, recruit diverse participants, find solutions and work for action and change. Groups are democratic, peer-led and small enough for individuals to get to know one another. Typically, groups are organized around a theme and meet several times over a number of weeks. Multiple groups are conducted simultaneously in order to create a community-wide dialogue on the issues up for consideration. Facilitators help groups to listen to one another's perspective, respect differing opinions, and identify potential solutions to shared concerns.

children in Montgomery County schools. Sometimes, she has felt unwelcome. "Some teachers go out of their way to say hello," Chavez says. "But other times, I will smile at a teacher who looks right through me. It's like I don't exist. They assume that because of how I look, I don't speak English."

The Montgomery County Public Schools Study Circles Program has been working for a number of years to help people feel at ease with the education system, and build relationships with the schools and with one another. The program was initiated because school leaders knew they needed to get parents involved to help all students succeed.

In fall 2007, Cannon Road Elementary School in Silver Spring, Maryland, reached out to Hispanic parents whose children make up the school's fastest growing group, now 35 percent of the student body. Everyone—parents and educators—agreed on one thing: They want all the children to succeed in school and in life. Hispanic parents met with the school principal, Judith Thiess, to suggest holding dialogues among Hispanic parents and school staff.

Thiess eagerly supported their efforts to recruit parents for a Spanish-language dialogue group. "One of my main goals is to help Hispanic parents feel comfortable coming to the school," she says. "We don't want them feeling that school is something that belongs to other people and not to them."

Eighteen participants—thirteen Hispanic parents, and five staff members, including the principal, a first-grade teacher, an ESL teacher and two other European American teachers—met six times. An interpreter attended every session to assist two teachers and the principal, who did not speak Spanish. Meetings were scheduled for Friday nights to accommodate parents who worked two jobs.

The conversations opened people's eyes. Educators who thought that Hispanic parents didn't value education were surprised to learn that, in many Hispanic countries, parents are expected to take care of matters at home, and let teachers take care of matters in school.

Fabio Rosales, a physician from Nicaragua explains: "In my country, each teacher has a class of about 40 children. We don't have the technology you have here. And many of the children have to leave school early to work so they can help their families. The expectations schools have of families are very different."

Participants in the dialogue were inspired by others' stories. "Sharing our early life experiences and how they impacted us, that surprised me," says Zenaida Pastor. "Reflecting on how I overcame past struggles helped me see that these experiences are part of the strength I offer to my children today."

Xiomara L. Coca, from El Salvador, says, "During these conversations, we're learning how to help our children do better in school. As for me, I didn't finish my own studies because I had to work. I often tell my son how important it is to study now for a better life later. I'll do whatever I can to help him."

One mother who cannot help her child with homework describes how she asks the teacher to help. "Other parents, they feel too timid to explain their predicament in English. But me? I recognize that I must send my son along the way better prepared to succeed in this world, whatever that takes."

As the dialogue progressed, enthusiasm grew. Parents discovered ways to help their children succeed academically. "One woman in my circle was glad

she came because now she knows she can ask for an interpreter when she goes to a parent/teacher conference," recalled Chavez.

Rosales felt moved by one woman's story of learning how to read and write all by herself at home. "She plans to take the ESL class. And she's grateful for one of the ideas that came out of our circle: having other parents help her son with homework that she cannot help him with."

When they looked at the statistics, many parents were surprised and worried by the low test scores of Hispanic students. They learned that advanced placement classes are made up mostly of European-American and Asian-American students. They also heard that closing the achievement gap has been a priority in the school district for nearly 20

years, and that studies confirm that strengthening partnerships between schools and the families they serve is key to children's success.

"Each week, new people kept joining the circle," says Thiess. "This networking of sorts just took off. It was great to see the parents working together and recognizing that they have more of a voice together than they do alone. My hope is that, through these conversations, new parent leaders from the Hispanic community will emerge."

Parents also felt the time was well spent, and the group is continuing to meet, from time to time. Says Lourdes Chavez, "Now I know the principal. I was able to share my thoughts with her through the interpreter. Before, I felt like no one in the school was listening. But the person at the top rung of the ladder was there, sitting with us, listening to our concerns, telling us her plans to make things better for our children. I walked away feeling something will come of this."

- A teacher who took part in the circle is leading English classes for parents, once a week.
- Parents have started a Spanish-language phone tree.
- A Spanish translation of the school directory provides information about school policies, and the names and numbers of people to call when they have questions.



A group of Spanish-speaking parents discuss ways to increase parent involvement in Montgomery County Public Schools.



Children joined their parents for the last discussion focusing on what actions to take to improve student achievement

- The principal recruited bilingual parents to volunteer at the school on Tuesday and Thursday afternoons. The school publicized the schedule so that Spanish-speaking parents know when they can get help.
- Improved communication between the school and the Hispanic community is lasting. Says Coca, "The most important thing is to involve parents. We showed the administration that we as Hispanic parents care about our children. And the principal has made me feel welcome. It has motivated me to continue coming."

All interviews were conducted in Spanish and translated to English.

Planning for Study Circles

Consider how you might structure a multi-week study circle in your classroom or among grade-level teams designed to address the issue of family engagement in the formative assessment process and shared decision-making. Typically, Study Circles progress from interpersonal exchanges and relationship building, to identifying issues to address, to developing a final action plan and set of strategies. Following is a general breakdown of a six-week Study Circle session:

Study Circle Planning

1. What issue do we want to address?

WEEKS 1 & 2	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Prepare for future sessions. 2. Introduce participants and explain the process. 3. As a group, set guidelines. 4. Build trust and comfort through warm-up communication activities. 5. Ask participants to share stories, interests, and experiences.
WEEK 3	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Create a list of issues for the group to address. Prioritize the list and choose one as an initial focus. 2. This session could include beginning to look at student data. 3. Discuss the issue through the lens of diverse cultural, linguistic, and racial family contexts.
WEEK 4	Go deeper with discussion on diversity concerns impacting the issue.
WEEK 5	Pivot to action planning by brainstorming ways to address the issue.
WEEK 6	Finalize action plan and next steps.

2. What barriers could get in the way?
3. List barriers discussed at the Study Circle discussion.
4. What would success look like? (Goal)
5. How will we get there?
6. Is the school already doing things to help address the issue and barriers?
7. What are some action steps we could take to reach the goal?

Academic Parent–Teacher Teams: Reorganizing Parent–Teacher Conferences Around Data^{iv}

by Maria C. Paredes

Voices From the Field

Maria C. Paredes, Director of Community Education at Creighton School District in Arizona, discusses one of the district’s family engagement strategies that was developed—in part—using data she collected demonstrating that parents were more interested in attending academically-oriented activities than other types of events such as potlucks or family-fun nights.

Creighton School District is a small urban community in Arizona with approximately 7,200 students, of whom 85% are Hispanic and 90% qualify for free and reduced-price lunch. Children in the district are tested informally on a weekly basis and then formally every quarter with a district-developed standards-based assessment in the areas of reading and math. To help families better understand the results of these tests, educators in the Creighton School District have reorganized the structure of parent–teacher conferences to accommodate the shift to a more focused discussion on data.



A New Paradigm for the Parent–Teacher Conference

Instead of relying on traditional parent–teacher conferences, Creighton gives the option for teachers to use a new program consisting of Academic Parent–Teacher Teams (APTT). Teachers who elect to participate in Academic Parent–Teacher Teams (APTTs) agree to hold 75-minute parent-team meetings three times a year and individual parent–teacher meetings once a year. (See text box for a description of the two main components.) This structure diverges from the usual parent–teacher conference schedule where teachers hold 15-minute individual conferences at the beginning and end of the school year. Instead, parents

of children in the entire class come together three times over the school year to analyze data together as a team.

Academic Parent–Teacher Teams Involve Two Main Components:

- 1. Three 75-minute classroom team meetings each year.** These team meetings are initiated by a personal invitation to the parent by the teacher, and consist of the teacher, the entire class of parents, and a parent liaison. Each meeting includes a review of student academic performance data, parent–student academic goal setting, teacher demonstration of skills to practice at home, parent practice, and networking opportunities with other parents.
- 2. One 30-minute individual parent–teacher conference.** In this yearly individual meeting, parents and teachers review student performance data and create action plans to optimize learning.

Presenting the Data

During team meetings, the teachers provide data on aggregate classroom performance. Each parent receives a folder containing his or her child’s academic data and is able to understand the child’s performance in relation to the rest of the class on standards for reading and math. Over the course of the year the data also depict how a child is progressing in relation to these standards. Teachers present the data in creative and concrete ways. For example, some teachers make a linear achievement line designating where the “average” child might score at different points in the year and ask parents to chart where their own child falls. Other teachers have parents color bar graphs to represent areas their child has mastered.

Setting Goals

The teacher supports the parents in setting 60-day goals for their child based on his or her academic scores. For example, if the standard is for 1st graders to learn 120 high-frequency words by the end of second quarter, children that have already reached that standard might have a goal of mastering all 120 by the end of November, whereas a child that has not reached that standard might have a goal of 75.

Demonstrating how parents can support learning:

After families set goals for their children, the teacher models different ways parents can support their child’s learning at home. Parents are then given an

opportunity to practice these activities with other parents. The district has also developed Parent Learning Calendars in Reading and Math for each grade level. These are academic pacing guides that inform parents what skills are being learned in the classroom and that provide practical home activities for each academic skill. Teachers use these calendars to select the activities they will model for parents during team meetings.

Team meetings end with an opportunity for parents to network and socialize with each other. One-on-one parent-teacher meetings are held once a year, or more regularly if requested, to also give parents a formal opportunity to meet with teachers on an individual basis.

Managing the New Structure

The Director of Community Education is responsible for meeting student achievement goals through family involvement. This individual provides training for teachers, district board members and administrators, and the parent liaisons. The Title I facilitator at each school oversees the APTTs and helps teachers plan for each team meeting, reflect on past meetings, and ensure that the process goes smoothly. The teacher is considered the master of teaching strategies and helps explain to parents their children's progress. Each school in Creighton District also has a parent liaison that is hired by the school to promote family engagement. The parent liaison sits in on APTT meetings at each school and supports the teacher in outreach and making sure attendance is high. The parent liaison also coaches parents in academic activities and receives extensive training in understanding data and offering extra support to parents.

Measuring the Results

Data sharing has helped Creighton School District shift the paradigm for how parents and teachers work together. A study of how APTTs influence student achievement and parent involvement is under way; however, anecdotes, short surveys, and analysis of utilization rates suggest six main results:

- 1. Improved social networks:** Parents report expanded social networks as a result of getting to know other families at team meetings.
- 2. Increased teacher participation:** APTTs are not a district mandate, but rather an optional grassroots project that teachers can adopt if they choose. In the 2009–2010 school year, 12 classrooms participated,

while 79 classrooms have already signed on for the 2010–2011 school year. This increase speaks to the power and success of the program.

- 3. Increased father involvement:** A surprising result has been the high numbers of fathers who have come to team meetings—more than in classrooms with conventional parent-teacher conferences. When fathers were asked what made them more interested in coming to team meetings, they said that they were specifically interested in academics and wanted to be involved in understanding their child's progress.
- 4. High attendance:** In the classrooms that had APTTs, attendance at meetings was 92%, on average. That was much higher than participation in conventional parent-teacher conferences.
- 5. Improved efficiency and time use:** With APTTs, teachers are more efficient and use their time in a more productive way. APTTs require the same number of hours as conventional conferences because the entire group of parents meets together at once, but instead of seeing parents only twice over the school year parents and teachers have four formal opportunities to meet.
- 6. Parents are empowered:** Many of the parents who participated in last year's APTTs asked to continue the program. They want their children to be in a classroom that will be participating in APTT this coming school year.

RESOURCES

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