



Connecticut Appleseed

Sowing the Seeds of Justice

IT TAKES A PARENT

TRANSFORMING EDUCATION IN CONNECTICUT

Parental involvement is a key part of strong and healthy schools. Informed, engaged and supportive parents play important roles at school as volunteers, leaders, and shapers of the school's future.

Compared to many states, Connecticut has created a robust infrastructure to inform and encourage parents who wish to become effective educational advocates for their children.

- The Connecticut General Assembly recently passed legislation that requires school districts to report on measures taken to improve parental involvement;
- Parents can receive intensive training on becoming advocates from organizations like the Parent Leadership Training Institute and Connecticut Parent Teacher Association; and
- Bridgeport holds an annual parent convention that brings hundreds of parents together to learn new ways to connect classroom learning with at home experiences.

Connecticut was one of the six states (Georgia, Illinois, Texas, Washington, and New Mexico) that participated in a nine month research and fact finding project. The findings in the report are based on more than one hundred state, district, and school leader interviews and over twenty parent focus groups.

In Connecticut we interviewed over twenty-five state and local policy makers and school administrators as well as representatives from community based organizations. We also talked to/surveyed nearly one hundred parents in Bridgeport, Bristol, and Hamden.

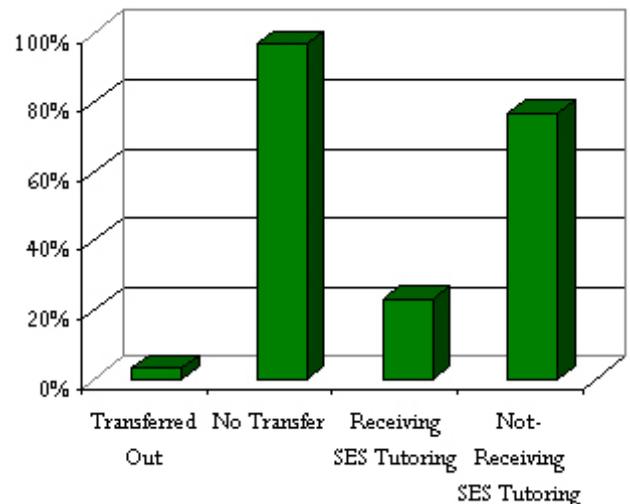
Despite this infrastructure, Connecticut parents are still unaware of, and therefore underutilize, options and rights under No Child Left Behind (NCLB). The national report from Appleseed, [It Takes a Parent: Transforming Education in the Wake of NCLB](#), shows that Connecticut parents are not out of the ordinary. It will take coordinated work on the federal and state level to make sure that parents know how to take available steps to prevent their children from being left behind.

FINDINGS

1. Parents have multiple barriers to using NCLB's School Choice and Supplemental Education Services

The two major barriers that prevent parents from utilizing their NCLB Supplemental Education Services (SES) tutoring options are that they simply aren't aware of the options and that the tutoring services are frequently not located in the neighborhood or city where the child lives. In districts where parents are aware of their SES options, many of the SES tutors are physically so far away that parents opt instead for in-school tutoring.

Eligible Connecticut families using School Choice and SES options: 2003-04



In school districts where choice options are available for parents to transfer their children, many times there are few slots available for students to transfer out of failing schools. When parents are aware of the small numbers of available slots at other schools, it adds to their frustration at being stuck at a failing school with the label of failing school attached to their child.

Steps to success

Utilize local community based organizations that already provide after-school services to provide SES tutoring to students. These are the organizations that already have a strong community presence and have established local trust. They also typically offer a range of supportive services for families and are neighborhood based.

2. Schools need to fully Integrate Parent Involvement

Parental involvement is frequently seen as an optional add-on, rather than an integral part of a successful school that improves student achievement through engaging the parents. While the reasons for this vary widely, several that were cited in our interviews included:

- "The teachers in our school system don't understand us and don't understand our culture."
- "Once you are in ninth grade you are free [from supervision]. The teachers don't care anymore."

At O'Connell School in Bristol, principal Mike Audette involves parents by subtle but effective means. Parents are required to park their cars and walk into the gym, where they pick up their children directly from the teachers. As a result a typical teacher will see ten parents a day during face-to-face pickups and engage in short conversations on how children are doing, where they are behind, and where they need to focus further.

Steps to success

1. One of the most important strategies to integrating parents is regular contact. In a survey of parents in Bristol, we found that parents who did not receive frequent communication from the school felt more negatively about their role in the school.
2. Elevate the priority of training that addresses the importance of parental involvement and ways to meet those challenges.
3. Connect parental engagement strategies with accountability goals—so that parental involvement strategies become an integral part of the ongoing school reform process.

3. Poverty, English Proficiency, Varying Cultural Expectations, and Family Mobility Are Among the Biggest Barriers to Parent Involvement

Many times school districts have rigid definitions of parental involvement that are limited to attending school functions within the pre-defined times or volunteering on daytime school trips. When parents do not get involved through those traditional outlets, the prevailing assumption is that they do not care about their child's education.

There are real barriers that have nothing to do with the parents' desires to become involved, including work schedules, the economic need to work more than one job, availability of daycare, and significant language/cultural barriers. School districts need to become more aware of the real-life barriers that keep parents from getting involved, particularly traditionally under-represented groups. By becoming more aware of these barriers and adjusting expectations, school districts can more effectively reach out to and connect with all parents.

Bridgeport's main avenue of parent outreach is through home school coordinators who serve as a liaison between the school and parents. They also conduct home visits and assist with the Parent Advisory Council meetings. To reflect the linguistic diversity within the district, all of the home school coordinators are bilingual and speak either Spanish or Laotian.

Steps to success

Parents we spoke to cited "little things" that helped them feel welcome in schools, such as:

1. Having a clearly identifiable person that is easy to find in the school
2. Having individuals within structures like the Parent Teacher Associations that "look" like the other parents or speak their language to be a mentor to new parents.

4. Too Many Parents Still Fail to Receive Clear Information on Their Children

When schools and districts report student performance data to parents, they typically provide written information that contains jargon and is not designed to be clearly understandable. Many times this information provided to parents does not get to the main question that one parent posed during a focus group: What is the school system doing to rally kids around [improving] CMTs/test scores? How can we be a part of it?

Since the Connecticut Mastery Tests and Connecticut Academic Performance Tests are given in March, parents typically do not receive their child's test scores before they finish the school year. This exacerbates the problem.

Steps to Success

1. Across focus groups, parents expressed the desire for one on one meetings where test scores are explained and they have the opportunity to ask questions.
2. Testing schedules should allow enough time for teachers to use test scores to adjust classroom instruction and allow parents to exercise their NCLB options.

LOCAL RESOURCES ON PARENTAL INVOLVEMENT/TRAINING

- **Discovery 2006 an Initiative of the William Graustein Foundation Parental Involvement Resources**

http://www.discovery.wcgmf.org/category_146.html

Contains national resources and best practices on parental involvement and engagement.

For more information contact: (203) 230-3330

- **Connecticut Parent Power**

<http://www.ctparentpower.org/>

A network of parents that work on educating and mobilizing parents in Connecticut on state policy.

For more information contact Ann Pratt at (203) 630-3566

- **Commission on Children: Parent Leadership Training Institute**

<http://www.cga.ct.gov/COC/plti.htm>

The Parent Leadership Training Institute (PLTI) trains parents to become advocates for their children. PLTI reached its 1,000th graduate in June of 2005 and saw its first graduate elected to the Connecticut General Assembly in January of 2005.

For more information contact Dawn Homer-Bouthiette at (860) 240-0085

- **ConnCAN: Report Card on Free Tutoring and School Choice**

http://www.conncan.org/action_center/great_schools/choose.asp

ConnCANs NCLB resources for parents that includes a list of school districts that provide free tutoring and school choice options under No Child Left Behind.

For more information contact Alicia DeSouza-Rocha at (877) 772-1933 ext. 16

CONNECTICUT APPLESEED (www.ctappleseed.org) is a statewide, non-partisan 501(c)3 organization working to identify and address injustices in our state. Our Mission is to develop solutions for the causes, rather than the symptoms, of our state's social problems. We deploy volunteer lawyers and other professionals to achieve systemic changes through legal and legislative advocacy, negotiation, education and other initiatives.

We are an affiliate of the national Appleseed organization, one of the nation's largest legal pro bono networks. "Centers" like Connecticut work both independently and collectively to use and share local experience to create solutions that are nationally relevant.

FOR MORE INFORMATION ON CONNECTICUT APPLESEED OR THIS REPORT CONTACT:

Claire Howard, Education Policy Associate at 203-988-1107 or clairehoward@aya.yale.edu