# Making the Most of School-Family Compacts

*Three urban schools made their Title I school-family compacts a powerful tool for student achievement.*

**Anne T. Henderson, Judy Carson, Patti Avallone, and Melissa Whipple**

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Wouldn't it be great if the administrators and teachers at a school—particularly a school with many at-risk students—could sit down with parents and exchange ideas about what part each might play in supporting students' learning? Imagine if parents could hear directly from teachers what teachers believe their kids most need to learn, how teachers plan to structure that learning, and precisely what parents can do at home to reinforce it. What if teachers could hear each caregiver's view on what most helps his or her particular child? And what if this meaningful interaction could happen through an existing protocol, one that most schools now perceive as a burdensome requirement?

As staff members in Connecticut's Department of Education and as consultants on school-family collaboration, we've worked with several elementary schools that initiated such meaningful conversations by transforming school-family compacts, which all Title I Schools are required to create, from boilerplate language into vehicles for collaboration. Creating the compact became a catalyst for authentic school-parent cooperation.

## A Missed Opportunity—Seized in Connecticut

No Child Left Behind stipulates that each school in the Title I program must develop an agreement, or "compact," that outlines how parents, school staff, and students will share responsibility for improving academic achievement. Compacts



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describe how the school and parents can work together to help students achieve the state's standards.

For most schools, compacts are a missed opportunity. As Judy Carson—who supports family engagement in Connecticut schools—found in reviewing compacts submitted by the state's schools, such documents rarely described activities that directly affect learning. Most compacts parroted general language in the law about parents' responsibility to support children's learning, for example, by monitoring their school attendance

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or their TV watching. And most were gathering dust on the shelf. This is true across the United States; a report from the U.S. Department of Education concluded that the parent involvement requirements, including compacts, are one of the weakest areas of Title I compliance (Stevenson & Laster, 2008).

Research shows that all students benefit from family involvement in education, and low-income and minority students benefit the most (Henderson & Mapp, 2002). Most parents want timely information about school goals and learning strategies so they'll know what to do at home to support their children's achievement. This is the kind of information compacts were intended to provide—but a document asking parents to pledge that they'll get their kids to bed on time doesn't provide it. So Carson and several colleagues in Connecticut's Department of Education decided that if school-family compacts have to be created, schools should use the process to spark authentic conversations and listen to parents' ideas about learning.

In 2008, the department initiated a program to improve school-parent compacts, bringing several consultants onto their team.[1] This team designed a training curriculum, "A New Vision of Title I School-Parent Compacts," that they offered as free professional development for Connecticut's urban school districts.

Connecticut launched the effort with a Compact Con-



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ference that summer. Participants from five urban districts across the state learned how to transform compacts into plans for partnership among teachers at common grade levels and among parents of learners in those grades. Revised compacts would list specific actions that parents, students, and teachers could take to improve performance; they would be linked to current school improvement plans and grounded in achievement data. Participants learned about promising practices to promote parent-teacher collaboration, explored practical home learning ideas, and made plans to seek parents' input. The state offered schools committed to this process follow-up support in the form of professional development and advice from team consultants. Here's how three urban elementary schools put this process into action, focusing on students' reading achievement.

## Sample School-Family Compact

| 1st Grade Teachers Will | 1st Grade Families Will |
|---|---|
| ■ Conduct daily small-group reading instruction. | ■ Make reading a daily part of family time. |
| ■ Read aloud each day to students. | ■ Ask children questions about books they're reading. |
| ■ Provide take-home reading materials for students. | ■ Visit the local library on a regular basis. |
| ■ Provide homework that supports topics learned at school. | ■ Complete homework assignments with students. |
| ■ Take weekly trips to the school library. | ■ Attend family literacy events at Macdonough School. |
| ■ Keep families informed of children's reading progress and ways to support learning at home. | ■ Stay in touch with teachers about reading progress. |

*Source:* Macdonough Elementary School, Middletown, Connecticut

### Reaching Out to Wary Parents

Macdonough Elementary School in Middletown, Connecticut, serves 80 percent low-income students (the highest percentage in the Middletown School District). In 2008, Macdonough had high staff turnover and a reputation for being a "not-so-good" school in a run-down, working-class neighborhood. Although the school had recently improved under the leadership of principal Jon Romeo, word had not gone out beyond the immediate neighborhood. A redistricting plan to improve racial balance was poised to move one-fourth of the district's elementary students to different schools, including moving many new kids to Macdonough. Parents packed school board meetings to express concerns.

Romeo realized that Macdonough had to create positive relationships with new families fast and assure them that it would provide high-quality academics. When Romeo first heard about the program to improve Title I compacts, "To be honest, I groaned," he admitted. The school's compact hadn't been revised in a while and was sitting on the shelf. But the school needed to work more closely with families to close the achievement gap between its middle-class and low-income students. Romeo realized that co-creating a compact was a way to start; so he assembled a team of teachers, curriculum specialists, and parents to take this on.

Drawing on what they learned at the 2008 Compact Conference and on help from consultant Patti Avallone, Macdonough's teachers invited families to family-friendly evening learning events, such as an author's tea, organized by grade level. Romeo confessed, "We were afraid if we mentioned compacts they'd stay away. We enticed them with a fun event featuring their children."

After each activity, teachers pulled parents into the library and asked them to share ideas on improving students' reading. Romeo talked to the group about grade-level goals, and teachers showed parents what reading instruction looked like in their child's grade. Families met in small groups, with a Macdonough staff member guiding each group's conversation. To encourage parents to open up, teachers asked, What advice would you offer next year's parents to support children's reading? Ideas poured out: Visit the library once a month, spend family time reading, write letters to other family members. "Teachers were impressed with parents' ideas and their obvious commitment to learning, and parents' eyes were opened to the school's intense focus on reading," Romeo recalled.

These gatherings were not a one-shot deal. After these initial conversations, teachers took parents' ideas and drafted compacts. There was a lot of back and forth at grade-level meetings between parents and teachers. For example, teachers told parents that they wanted to send home reading materials with students each night to help students get into the habit of reading and that they'd like parents to monitor and guide their



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children's nightly reading. Parents were willing, but they asked the teachers to "tell us exactly what you want us to work on and how we can help."

Teachers were surprised; they'd never thought of telling parents what strategies they used in class. Teachers showed parents, for instance, about making text-to-self connections with books. Once parents learned that relating what their kids were reading to something in their lives—like comparing a character's trip to a recent family trip—is motivating and helps comprehension, they said, "Oh, we can do that." Through such exchanges, many people had their fingerprints on the finished compacts (see "Sample School-Family Compact," p. 50).

As redistricting went into effect, Macdonough used the momentum to promote relationships. Teachers took walks in the neighborhood, during which they gave books to families and discussed improvements to the school. A back-to-school picnic enabled teachers and parents to socialize informally. At the school's annual open house, teachers shared concrete information about what students would be learning and doing in class. School staff met with new families to invite them to help the school become the best it could be, using the compacts to explain how families might help improve student success in reading.

News began to spread that the school was improving. In 2008, a state advocacy group named Macdonough one of the 10 most improved schools in Connecticut.

### Bringing Reading Strategies Home

At M. D. Fox Elementary School in Hartford, literacy coaches Rosana Bannock and Elise Francis initiated the compact-creating process. The school serves 900 children; 70 percent are Latino, and many others are refugees from Bosnia, Thailand, and Laos.

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**Parents want real-time information about school goals and learning strategies so they'll know what to do at home.**

Through flyers and personal phone calls, Bannock and Francis invited parents to a meeting in the school's library that featured a presentation on developing compacts and how important parents are to the process. After the presentation, parents broke into groups according to their children's grade level. Teachers shared with each group tips they could use to help their kids succeed in school, and then asked two questions: What do teachers need to do to help students? and What can the school do to help parents support their children?

Bannock and Francis circulated the parents' ideas to other Fox parents, who checked off the ideas most important to them. Teachers identified recurring themes that they used to construct the final compact for parents' approval. The exchange was a learning process, noted Francis. "We had assumptions about what parents know and can do [to help children learn], and they're much more willing to do things than we thought." Bannock explained how the discussions boosted school attendance:

> Parents know their kids need to get to school on time, but single moms with four and five kids are struggling. As a result of the compact conversations, teachers have more sympathy for what families are going through, and grandparents are filling in to help kids get to school.

Teachers designed specific activities for different grade levels in response to parents' suggestions. For example, parents said they didn't understand what children learn in kindergarten—



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do they just play or do they learn to read? Teachers responded with a three-day kindergarten orientation for parents at which they gave parents learning materials and showed them how to support reading at home. An astounding 95 percent of families came.

### Pushing For Pride in Student Work

Renata Lantos, principal at Bielefield Elementary School in Middletown, also had students' reading on her mind. Bielefield's attendance zone is the largest in the Middletown district, and more than one-half of its students are from low-income families. Although reading achievement is now improving steadily, at the time of compact creation, it was below average for the state.

After attending the Compact Conference, Lantos realized she and her staff had to revise their compact, which consisted of general compliance statements. Two teachers developed a presentation for families that explained the schools' reading goals. They linked practical strategies for improving reading skills to these goals and showed how these strategies could be outlined in the compact.

For example, Bielefield teachers now assign each student books that fit that student's reading level. Teachers have agreed to help students select "just-right books" and provide parents with reading materials connected to the books each week; parents agree to ensure that their children read regularly, encourage them to share and use new vocabulary, and use the materials the teacher sends home to have "book talks." Students agree to read these books regularly, keep a reading record, and build a list of new words they learn.

During follow-up conversations, a major issue came up: Students needed to take more pride in their work. They were handing in subpar work that showed a lack of motivation. "The whole building got involved," recalls Lantos. "Parents had great ideas, such as focusing on 'pride in work' in the newsletter and exhibiting student projects." At each grade level, students discussed what taking pride in your work means.

Teachers constructed a rubric that pinpointed three levels of student effort and time on task. Students described the basic level as "No effort. I worked way too quickly, and I didn't reread or revise my work. The paper is not my best and neatest." The top level is "My best effort. I thought and tried my hardest. I spent enough time to give my brain quality time. I carefully reread and revised my work." Teachers sent the rubric home, and parents signed off on reading it. Parents agreed to regularly review their children's work and discuss with them the meaning of pride. During parent-teacher conferences, teachers refer to the rubric.

Lantos says the result has been a huge improvement in student work: "Even 2nd graders get it, like the one who wrote: 'Now I know what quality work looks like.'" All Bielefield students have produced at least one "pride paper" that meets the top-level criteria on the rubric.

### Keys to Success

We have discovered practices that help turn compacts into catalysts for action. The most important thing is to create a setting for parents and teachers to talk about how to help the kids—and to get to know one another. At Macdonough, Romeo asked staff members to facilitate meetings with families to ensure teacher buy-in. The process went from a conversation between a self-selected group of teachers and parents, to discussions among many teachers, to one with the entire parent teacher association. Parent leaders who emerged went to follow-up compact conferences, which strengthened their capacity to engage other families.

Continuing follow-up by the principal is important. Administrators should affirm practices that teachers are already doing—such as book drives and trips to the library—and explicitly link existing practices to the compact and the school improvement plan. This takes teachers' actions beyond "random acts of family engagement" and integrates them into a systematic plan for improving achievement (Weiss, Lopez, & Rosenberg, 2010).

Working with grade-level colleagues inspires teachers. We found that developing compacts for each grade level made a big difference. At M. D. Fox, the literacy coaches facilitated grade-level meetings and brainstormed specific activities for teachers in each grade.

There is a striking difference between

## Tools for Engagement

The following books and websites provide resources for engaging families in students' learning.

- *Beyond the Bake Sale* by Anne T. Henderson, Karen L. Mapp, Vivian Johnson, and Don Davies (The New Press, 2007). See especially Chapter 5.
- Connecticut State Department of Education's web page on compact tools (www.sde.ct.gov/sde/cwp/view.asp?a=2678&q=320734).
- Family Involvement Network of Educators (www.finenetwork.org).
- National Network of Partnership Schools (www.csos.jhu.edu/p2000/ppp/index.htm). See especially the compilation of promising practices.
- San Diego Unified School District's website on family engagement (www.sandi.net/parentoutreach).



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the school-family compacts of participating schools before and after this improvement effort. New compacts are more focused on student learning and linked to school data. They are stimulating new, creative activities in schools. Connecticut's Department of Education will be launching the program statewide as a best practice for Title I parent involvement, leveraging the language of the law to create a powerful strategy for parent-teacher collaboration. EL

[1]Other important partners were the state Parent Involvement Resource Center and the Capitol Region Education Council.

**For most schools, school-family compacts are a missed opportunity.**

### References


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