

SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT GRANT (SIG) PRACTICE: ENGAGING THE COMMUNITY

GRIFFIN-SPALDING COUNTY SCHOOL SYSTEM ♦ GRIFFIN, GEORGIA

Strengthening relationships between families and schools and increasing opportunities for parents to support students' academic growth is a critical piece of Griffin-Spalding County School System's (Griffin-Spalding) strategic plan to turn around its lowest performing schools.¹ Parent engagement was particularly low at the district's high schools in comparison to its elementary and middle schools. To maximize its efforts to engage parents and the community in the turnaround process, Griffin-Spalding expanded on existing parent and community engagement strategies through community forums and media outreach, parent advisory roles, and partnerships with community members.

THE STRATEGY: Gaining the Support of Parents and the Community

Griffin-Spalding's efforts to gain the support of parents and the community for the district's turnaround work include many opportunities for engagement. The district emphasizes three avenues for engagement:

- Information sharing and dissemination during community forums and through media outreach
- Advisory roles, which allow parents to provide guidance and feedback to district and school leaders through participation in the Superintendent's Advisory Council or in districtwide planning meetings
- Partnerships with community members in support of the district's lowest performing schools

Information Sharing and Dissemination. As a first step to engaging parents and the community, Griffin-Spalding began sharing information about its SIG high school. The district used a combination of community forums and a media outreach campaign to reach as many parents and community members as possible.

Community Forums. Griffin-Spalding began using community forums to involve parents in its school turnaround efforts before the district received SIG funds to serve Griffin High School. During the writing of the application for the SIG subgrant, the district and the high school convened community forums, inviting all parents and community members to help develop the school's turnaround plan. At the initial community forum, approximately 60 parents and community members worked in groups to brainstorm about topics such as curriculum and courses, parent training and resources, technology, character building, and student resources.² Parents and community members

Griffin-Spalding County School System at a Glance

Start of SIG Implementation: 2010–11
Locale: Suburb, Large
Enrollment: 10,614
Free or Reduced-Price Lunch: 73%
Racial/Ethnic Composition: 47% White, 44% Black, 5% Hispanic, 3% Other, 1% Asian, <1% American Indian
English Learners: 1%
Students With Disabilities: 9%

Cohorts 1 and 2 SIG Schools in Griffin-Spalding

SIG Model	# of Schools	School Level	# of Schools
Transformation	1	Elementary	0
Turnaround	0	Middle	0
Restart	0	High	1
Closure	0	Other	0

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also ranked their preference for the instructional model to be used at the SIG high school.³ Participants provided input that helped determine the focus of the school's three career academies: (1) Consumer Sciences Academy, (2) Fine Arts Academy, and (3) Engineering Academy.

After receiving SIG funds, Griffin-Spalding expanded its approach to community forums by inviting the participation of key community organizations—such as the Kiwanis Club, Rotary Club, and Chamber of Commerce—in which many of the parents and community members are engaged. The principal purposely reaches out to the leads of these organizations to enlist their support and participation in the forums. In addition, district staff and the SIG school principal attend community events—such as town hall meetings, civic events, and church events—in order to reach a broader audience. During these meetings and events, the principal shares information about the school's turnaround efforts and solicits feedback from community members. This approach also allows the district and school staff to identify parents and community members who may be willing to serve in an advisory or partnership role.

Media Outreach. In addition to holding community forums and events, the district launched a media outreach campaign designed to share information about the district's SIG school turnaround efforts more frequently with parents and community members. This outreach effort includes monthly school newsletters, public service announcements on a weekly radio show, weekly phone calls and e-mails to SIG high school parents, frequent social media postings, and a weekly district e-mail sent to all parents in the district.

- *School Newsletters.* Griffin-Spalding disseminates a monthly newsletter that explains the activities and progress made since the school's turnaround efforts began. Newsletter articles focus on the status of the school's career academies, which are a large component of the district's turnaround plan. The newsletter is sent to parents electronically. Parents who are on the school's electronic mailing list are able to access the most recent and past newsletters.
- *Public Service Announcements.* Griffin-Spalding administrators—including the superintendent for instruction, the director of federal programs, and the SIG high school's principal—conduct public service announcements about the activities at the SIG high school on a weekly radio show. These announcements are paid for by a local radio station.
- *Weekly Phone Calls and Social Media.* The assistant principal at the SIG high school uses an automated system to call parents on Monday mornings to give them the schedule of school events for the week. He also e-mails parents on an electronic mailing list about school activities. The principal of the SIG high school was the first administrator in the district to use social media to send instant messages to the community. He posts information, such as strategies observed during classroom observations, to a social media website.
- *Weekly District E-Mail to Parents and the Community.* Griffin-Spalding disseminates, by e-mail, a weekly "Communicator" to staff, parents, and community members across the district. This weekly communication provides ongoing information about the turnaround process (e.g., increased learning time implemented at the SIG high school).

Advisory Roles. Parents have two unique opportunities to guide and provide feedback to Griffin-Spalding on the direction of its school turnaround efforts: the Superintendent's Advisory Council and districtwide planning meetings.

Advisory Council. The Superintendent's Advisory Council is composed of 18 nominated members—including six parents, six students, and six teacher-leaders. Members are nominated by school leaders, community members, and school staff; the superintendent selects the members from these nominations. The parents on the Advisory Council are active in parent-teacher organizations, school councils, fundraisers, and other school events, and also are responsible for bringing parents' questions or concerns to the superintendent. In addition, they lead and set the agenda⁴ for monthly 1½-hour Advisory Council meetings with the superintendent. The Advisory Council parents communicate their concerns, suggest changes in practice, and request information from the superintendent—mostly

at the monthly meetings but also through e-mail and phone calls. Formal minutes are approved at each meeting and shared with all school and district stakeholders through the district’s website.

Planning Meetings. Parents are invited to participate in district-wide planning meetings held from December through March each year to plan activities for the following school year. Topics for discussion include the following: annual review of benchmarks in core content areas, review of data on standardized tests and overall data trends, district strengths and weaknesses, student attendance and discipline, parent/community participation, changing and unmet needs, schoolwide reform strategies, instructional quality, strategies to attract highly qualified staff, professional development, and program coordination.

Partnerships With the Community. With support from a nonprofit organization, Griffin-Spalding develops school-community partnerships that allow the district to connect community services and resources to student needs. Across the district, 250 partners—including community members, businesses, industries, and civic and faith-based organizations—provide various supports to schools, with varying numbers of partners working with each school. Partners donate physical resources (such as science equipment), project-specific supplies (including poster boards and cardboard boxes), and refreshments and T-shirts at fundraising events. They also provide tutoring, volunteer at parent and community involvement activities, assist with monitoring state assessments, and disseminate information to other community members and organizations (e.g., at community organization meetings in which the partners are actively involved, as well as in newsletters produced by their respective organizations).

CHALLENGES AND LESSONS LEARNED

Griffin-Spalding originally focused on ensuring that all parents were invited and welcomed to the district’s forums and planning meetings, but district administrators quickly realized that parents’ limited time and other challenges (e.g., transportation) prevented them from engaging in these meetings. To overcome this barrier, the district chose to go out into the community and meet with parents where it was convenient for them. Now, district administrators attend events throughout the community—including, for example, Rotary Club events and other activities. After implementing this approach, Griffin-Spalding administrators reported an increase in parent and community engagement.

CONCLUSION

Griffin-Spalding County School System’s parent and community engagement strategies include frequent and multiple methods of information sharing and opportunities for feedback through parent advisory roles and community partnerships that provide services and resources to address student needs. The district’s goal is to engage all parents in its school turnaround efforts. According to one district administrator, parents now have more opportunities to become informed and engaged, and the district strives “to provide every single opportunity to keep parents involved in whatever way we can.”

SOURCES

Data for the tables on page 1 are from the following sources: District at-a-glance data are from the NCES Common Core of Data (2011–12), and SIG school data are from an internal document within the U.S. Department of Education Office of State Support.

IMPLEMENTATION DETAILS

¹ The district's strategic plan for 2009–2015 is available online at <https://eboard.eboardsolutions.com/StrategicPlan/PlanDetail.aspx?S=4079&PID=1478>.

² Minutes from a specific community forum about the SIG high school included the following discussion topics:

“Curriculum—Increase communicative skills, i.e., verbal and written skills;”

“Parent Training/Resources—There needs to be a full-time parent involvement coordinator that is visible. There should be parent workshops on what to expect after high school, potential careers, and nontraditional jobs. Parents should be able to help students with work, so students need to bring books home;”

“Technology—Classrooms should be 21st century with more laptops, smart boards, and wireless Internet access in the building;”

“Character Building—There should be an ethics course for all four grade levels; there should be more opportunities for students to develop work ethics in school. The work ethic should relate to the real world and building skills for jobs;”

“Student Resources—There should be more mentoring programs for students.”

³ The instructional models discussed at the community forum included International Baccalaureate, project-based learning, inquiry-based learning, early college high school/dual enrollment, thematic academy, and industry certification. After considering these learning models, participants determined which model or combination of models best fit the SIG high school's needs.

⁴ The agenda must be approved by the district prior to the meetings.