



Key points:

- Discard generic parent engagement
- Unleash the power of creative collaboration
- Insist on outreach that meets families' needs

Link parent activities to achievement

[Barrow County \(Ga.\) Schools](#) rose to the challenge of Georgia's 360-Degrees of Family Engagement movement, which provides a collaborative framework for parent involvement planning among Title I, special education, and early childhood.

The resulting plans create a tighter link between parent involvement activities and improvement goals, and apply findings behind specific research, such as Maslow's hierarchy of needs, PTA's [National Standards for Family-School Partnerships](#), and Strengthening Families' [Protective Factors](#).

Leaders in Barrow found the approach just made sense, said Shannon Hammond, the district's coordinator of federal programs and school improvement.

"360 was a nice way to formalize what we were doing on our own," she said. "It's not just parent involvement activities for the sake of the activities. When the template came along, we said, 'Hey! Somebody else thinks like we do.'"

It took time to adapt to the statewide template's language. However, it helped that the state allowed the district to adapt or translate terms to mesh well with work already in progress that aligned with 360, Hammond said.

Integrated effort

The 360 approach helps districts make better use of Title I, special education, and early childhood resources already aimed at similar goals. "Title I is not the lone ranger anymore," she said. When departments work in isolation, it's harder to maximize what you've got and really target families' needs, Hammond said. "We need to think about what our parents need and how we can use all these resources to meet parents' needs."

The district's 360 plan includes a Parent Expo for parents of students with disabilities, adult literacy courses, a Latino Family Town Hall, and a Young Child Expo. Another outreach event, Family Academy, happens five Saturdays a year. Parents select a morning and afternoon course with options that range from fun activities on a budget or helping their child with math, to decoding credit scores or how to buy a house. "Our idea is that all those kinds of skills lead to strong parents," she said. Parents who attend multiple events earn credits and can graduate. In December 2010, six parents got to flip their tassels and toss their mortarboard hats. "For a lot of those parents, it was the first time they'd graduated from anything," Hammond said.

Free child care is offered, and classes are provided by district staff and community groups, which also set up displays and give out information. One parent who attended realized he specialized in a topic of interest to parents, so he later returned as a presenter. The district tries to teach two sessions in Spanish; a district translator attends other sessions with parents.

Although the district can't prove that Family Academy or any other parent involvement event increases student achievement, its parent involvement policy has shifted to measurable goals that matter, Hammond said.

"Our old goals used to be, 'We'll have three parent nights per year.' I can count them, 'one, two, three,' but who cares?" she said.

The district views parent involvement as a necessity for reaching its improvement goals, and the 360 plan formalizes that belief by helping staff map out a detailed plan linked to research, she said.

"Maybe parent involvement gets the credit or not," Hammond said, "but kids got what they needed, so that's what matters."

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