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Educators ‘step out’ to draw parents in

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In an effort to reach out to families, the Learning Community staff canvasses neighborhoods to spread its message.

PROVIDENCE — On one of the coldest days of the year, nearly two dozen staff members of the Learning Community charter school fan out across snowy streets of three cities to bring the school’s message of hope and high academic expectations to the public.

One team, led by Cheryl Luciano, a literacy assistant, gathers at Perry Middle School on Hartford Avenue, a neighborhood of mostly Latino mom-and-pop businesses. The team includes a nurse, an instructional coach and the special-education director, among others.

Luciano, who used to work in the neighborhood and speaks Spanish, walks into the Victoria Beauty Salon and explains the school’s mission: Learning Community is a kindergarten through grade five charter school that is open to children from Providence, Pawtucket and Central Falls, where it is located.

Yes, she says, it is free. And yes, it is a public school. Students are chosen by lottery and next month the school is sponsoring an open house for interested parents.

“The school is fantastica,” Luciano tells a woman named Rosa whose son attends a local Catholic school. “It is a good education, exactly like Times2,” another local charter school.



Learning Community literacy assistant Cheryl Luciano, right, gets permission from Tina Paquin to put up a school flier at the Hartford Laundromat last week.

Rosa says that she has applied for admission of her child to the Paul Cuffee Charter School in Providence for four consecutive years, without success. Don’t give up, Luciano tells her. Apply to all of the charters.

As the sun drops below the horizon, the team repeats the same message at a local grocery store, a meat market and the Panaderia bakery, where the owner offers the teachers fresh bread.

Wherever the team goes, its members hand out applications and post fliers about the upcoming open house. At a pizzeria in Pawtucket, the owner is so taken with the teachers’ enthusiasm that he offers to put the school’s flier on every one of his pizza boxes, a fresh take on the notion of direct-mail advertising.

On the same day, another group from the Learning Community rides the buses home with their students to see

where they live and to meet the parents who pick up their children at the bus stop. A third group visits parents at home while a fourth will attend community meetings during the next few weeks.

Lindsay Correia, a speech language therapist, was stunned to discover that some of her students spent more than an hour riding the school bus home. The youngest children fell asleep right away, she said, and some had a hard time waking up when the bus arrived at their stop.

“It definitely was an eye opener,” Correia said. “Now I understand why the kids are so tired in the morning and why they may be hungry, because they’ve been on the bus for so long.” Family engagement has come a long way from the traditional bake sales and PTA meetings. Boston teachers are visiting immigrant families at home. In Miami, the school district is offering parents classes on school discipline,

nutrition and child development. And in Omaha, Neb., the schools have created a Web site where parents access teachers' grade books so they can follow their child's progress.

"Many schools are beginning to do this kind of outreach across the country," said Joyce Epstein, director of the National Network of Partnership Schools. "The school is hoping that this face-to-face contact will lead parents to attend parent-teacher conferences so they can help their children with their homework."

Getting parents involved in their child's education is one of the biggest challenges facing urban school systems. Typically, both parents work and some hold more than one job. In addition, language barriers, combined with unfamiliarity with school bureaucracy, can discourage immigrant families from participating in school activities.

Yet, 40 years of research has shown that getting parents involved is one the most effective methods of improving a child's success in school. Epstein said. The Learning Community was founded in 2004 on the assumption that family engagement is essential if children are to succeed in school. One of co-director Sarah Friedman's primary responsibilities is reaching out to

parents in ways that are meaningful and lasting.

"The definition of family engagement was developed through a suburban lens — the bake sale, the PTO meeting," she said. "When low-income families can't do these types of involvement, they are blamed as not caring." Friedman and codirector Meg O'Leary are committed to moving away from their comfort zone, which, in this case, means bringing the Learning Community to the family through a process the school calls "stepping out."

"Last year, our overarching theme was inviting our families in," Friedman said. "It's easy to stay within the known world of the school building. But we're trying to overcome the historical baggage that comes with the power dynamic between parents and teachers."

Last year, several teachers hosted a small breakfast with parents as a way to invite them into the building. At one breakfast, each parent was asked to write a poem about him or herself, not simply as a way to break the ice but as an example of how writing is taught to students at the Learning Community.

"Years ago, people used to share the community that they lived in," Friedman said. "Your child's teacher lived next door and it was easier to

make relationships happen. Now that we are living in more isolated situations, it takes extra effort to create that shared sense of community."

As with many decisions at the Learning Community, the staff collectively decided how they wanted to reach out to families. Some teachers staged publishing parties to showcase their students' work, others held office hours in the neighborhood, while others decided to attend a local event in their community.

It looks like the school's fresh approach to family engagement is paying off. The Learning Community ranks first in the state among all public schools for the percentage of parents who say the school "contacts me if my child does something well or improves." The school is also the highest-ranking urban school for the percentage of parents who say the school "responds to my concerns and requests within a reasonable amount of time."

"My goal is that by the end of the year, people feel like they have this whole toolbox of different strategies," Friedman said, "so that for any given family, they can pick and choose from a range of experiences."

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At The Learning Community, we believe that literacy empowers each individual to have a voice, assume community responsibility and take social action. We expect leadership at every level. We grow teacher leaders, student leaders and community leaders.