



Harvard Family  
Research Project

## Community Partnerships to Support High School Success

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## Introduction

Graduation and dropout rates are the center of the conversation around high school reform, with President Obama and the U.S. Department of Education leading the charge to boost high school and college graduation rates among our nation's students in the next ten years. Recognizing the need for a comprehensive approach to keeping teens in school and successfully completing high school, the AT&T Foundation awarded the United Way Worldwide (UWW) a grant to start a new initiative—*Family Engagement for High School Success*. The goal of this grant was to identify promising family engagement strategies with a strong likelihood of raising high school graduation rates, and to share that information with communities around the country. Together with Harvard Family Research Project, UWW worked with local United Way chapters across the country to develop plans for high school success.

The planning process made possible by this initiative was innovative and unique. It helped strengthen schools' and communities' action plans by emphasizing a holistic view of students in which families supported and advocated for their successful journey to high school graduation. By adopting an outcome-focused approach, and using local data, local United Way sites designed different models of family engagement that removed barriers and built stronger connections between families, schools, and communities. The process also engaged school and community partners for buy-in, as well as empowering parents and students to take an active role in planning so that strategies would address their real needs and interests. This was the first time in these communities that all stakeholders participated in developing strategies to boost high school graduation rates, resulting in action plans that had true potential for success.

In all, 15 United Way chapters and their surrounding communities participated in the planning process, and eight of them are implementing their plans beginning in the 2010–2011 academic year. The following profiles highlight the innovations and early outcomes at those eight sites, as well as anticipated 1- to 4-year outcomes for the focal students. Stay tuned as the sites begin to put their plans into action and see which strategies emerge as the most effective to boost high school success in their communities. A forthcoming Planning and Implementation Toolkit will further detail the project, with the intent of helping other communities to take action.

## United Way of Southeast Missouri (SEMO)—Cape Girardeau, MO

**Who:** 550 students in grades 8–12. Targeted rising ninth graders have reading and writing scores below the district’s grade level expectations, while the targeted high school students are on the district’s academic watch list.

**Why:** In the past 5 years, Cape Central Senior High School’s dropout rate nearly doubled to 13%, while the graduation rate steadily decreased from a high of 79% to its current 72%.

Focus groups with school, parents, and community partners revealed that many of the targeted students’ families did not communicate with schools and did not feel welcome there.

**What:** To support student learning and promote more positive and effective home–school relationships, the planning group put together a support package that includes the following:

- United Way of SEMO hired parent liaisons to bridge the parent–school gap and serve as advocates for students. Liaisons build better relationships between families and school staff, and train parents to use tools and resources that will support their teenagers’ learning.
- The project will provide parents with technology training to support their use of the student data system.
- Schools will begin holding student-led parent–teacher conferences, allowing students to guide the conversation and help build relationships between parents and teachers.
- Community partners who have existing relationships with the United Way will provide tutoring, mentoring, enrichment activities, and access to computer labs after school.
- Community partners will provide alternative settings for parent–teacher conferences and other meetings with school staff and support groups, so that parents have a neutral space in which to interact with teachers, staff, and support groups.

### Innovations

- Schools hired parent liaisons dedicated to improving parent–school communication and supporting student learning.
- Parents will receive training on Parent Link, the online portal for families to track grades, credits earned, attendance, discipline, and homework assignments.

## EARLY OUTCOMES

Already, the parent liaison put in place by the AT&T planning grant has reached 43 focal students, connecting them with resources and improving the families’ relationships with school staff. Of those students, **32 (74 %) are now on track academically and will be promoted to the next grade level at the end of the year.** The project plans to expand this strategy by adding a parent liaison for each grade level.

## 1- TO 4-YEAR OUTCOMES

- **By 2014, over 90% of the district’s students will be on track for high school graduation.**
- **Fewer students will fall below the proficiency level in reading and writing assessments.**
- **More ninth and tenth grade students will earn a C or higher in English and math.**
- **Fewer students will miss 10 or more days of school per year.**

## United Way of Southern Nevada—Las Vegas, NV

**Who:** 1,251 incoming ninth graders and their families from five high schools. Focal students have either failed a core subject or have attendance below 90%.

**Why:** Approximately 35% of all students in the Clark County School District fail to graduate from high school; additionally, 60% of at-risk students struggle to complete graduation on time.

Parents feel that they don't have a voice in the school. They don't feel welcome and are concerned about the lack of personal and timely communication.

**What:** Schools will take steps to employ outreach efforts that are culturally and linguistically appropriate and will build relationships with families by being responsive to their needs. Some examples follow:

- Schools will create parent resource centers where they can meet other parents and school staff; they will also learn how to access the online student data system.
- Schools will give parents a voice by holding town hall and informational meetings, where parents will be able to meet staff and other concerned parents.
- Schools will offer “English as a second language” classes to enhance parents’ ability to communicate in English.
- Schools will foster peer networks by using parent volunteers to reach out to focal families. They will also use multiple methods of communication, such as phone, mail, and email.
- Community partners will help develop and disseminate linguistically appropriate materials and provide translation services.
- Schools, with help from community partners, will provide incentives for families to attend events and meetings such as childcare vouchers and transportation tokens or gas cards.

### Innovations

- At newly created parent resource centers, families will learn to use Parent Link, an online system that offers information about attendance, grades, homework, and school-related events via notifications through telephones, email, and the internet.
- The project will leverage the Nevada State Parent Information and Resource Center’s conceptual model for family engagement to strengthen partnerships by training school staff, AmeriCorps, and families on how to best educate and engage focal families to then meet the needs of our community’s children.

## EARLY OUTCOMES

In a community where parents did not feel welcome at schools, and where there were significant cultural and language barriers to involvement, **over 255 parents and 3800 students participated in the planning process** through surveys, focus groups, and in-person meetings to give schools direction about what kinds of outreach and support students and parents need to feel like they have a voice at the schools.

## 1- TO 4-YEAR OUTCOMES

- **80% of focal students will maintain attendance rates of 90% or higher in ninth grade.**
- **80% of focal students will maintain a cumulative GPA of 2.0 or greater during ninth grade.**

## **United Way of Northern Nevada and the Sierra and the Education Alliance of Washoe County—Reno, NV**

**Who:** Approximately 600 rising ninth graders across 12 high schools who are not on track to graduate. These at-risk students were identified using the Washoe County School District Risk Index, which factors in data on eighth grade reading and math performance, student retention, student mobility, and attendance.

**Why:** Graduation rates for the 12 high schools range from 74% to 41%.

Families lack access to schools' data resources, have difficulty helping their teenagers transition from middle to high school, don't understand graduation or attendance requirements, and have difficult home circumstances.

**What:** Planning committee teams (which included families, school staff, and administrators) worked together to identify assets and barriers to family engagement and create a system of supports, including:

- The United Way will help school staff engage in proactive, positive communication, such as welcome phone calls, orientations, and home visits, while moving away from the current pattern of only contacting families with negative information.
- Schools will communicate graduation requirements and education terms in clear, accessible language to families who may not be familiar with the US education system.
- Schools will match families with academic supports (such as Smartthinking.com, an online tutoring program) and will include families in their college and career preparation offerings.
- High schools will be more proactive about reaching out to families at the beginning of ninth grade to ensure they have necessary information about courses and other graduation requirements, rather than waiting until problems arise.
- High schools will partner with middle schools to create parent engagement strategies to ensure that parent involvement doesn't drop as students begin ninth grade.
- Schools will develop parent mentors to help parents navigate the education system.
- Schools will provide home visits for families who may not have an easy way to get to the school.

### **Innovations**

- Schools are making tools that track student progress more accessible to parents, including use of the new system-wide student-data portal.
- Schools will open computer labs for afterschool use by parents and families, and partner with community organizations, such as the YMCA, to provide computer access in non-school locations.

## **EARLY OUTCOMES**

Over 80 parents have been trained on the use of Edline, an online monitoring tool that tracks attendance, assignments, and grades. This training included information on high school graduation requirements and college or post-secondary options, and **linked parents with a teacher or counselor to develop a high school graduation plan with their teen.**

## **1- TO 4-YEAR OUTCOMES**

- **Students will achieve 90% attendance and earn six credits per year.**
- **Students will demonstrate knowledge of graduation requirements and pathways to college by the end of the first term of their ninth grade year.**

## United Way of Southern Cameron County—Brownsville, TX

**Who:** 50 ninth grade students (from each incoming class for the next 3 years) who have failed two or more sections of the state-mandated eighth grade test, and had over seven absences during eighth grade.

**Why:** From 2004–2009, Los Fresnos school district lost an average of 40% of students from each class.

Families are reluctant to get involved due to a lack of direct and timely communication from schools, lack of information about attendance and course requirements, and the inability to participate in school activities due to conflicting work schedules.

**What:** The project seeks to improve home–school communication and build family awareness and skills to support high school graduation through a set of aligned strategies that include:

- Schools will hire a family coordinator for each cohort to serve as a case manager for students and families. The position will be based on the *Promotora* model, appropriate to the Hispanic community that the project serves. The Promotora is seen as someone who is a member of the community, speaks the language, and understands families’ values and challenges.
- The family coordinator will provide parents with frequent updates on attendance and grades via text and other methods.
- Rising ninth grade students will attend a summer academy with their families to familiarize themselves with the campus, get a head start by earning a half credit in an elective course, establish relationships with staff, learn about attendance requirements, and co-create a graduation plan with staff and family.
- Family members will participate in hands-on training in the district’s online attendance and grade monitoring system, receive a map of locations where they can access computers, and be introduced to “Homework Help” tutorials that will be provided after school.
- Parents will establish a Parent Council to form networks of support and take action around the common goal of high school graduation.

### Innovations

- In response to parent requests to receive updates about their students through text messages, the United Way is piloting a program to notify parents of student absences via text message.
- Schools will use text messaging, email, and other methods based on family preference, to update parents about academic progress.

### EARLY OUTCOMES:

The planning process debunked long-held myths about the dropout problem. School leaders had assumed that income, limited English proficiency, and behavioral problems were the best predictors of future dropouts, but a careful review of data showed instead that the real predictors were attendance and grades. In response, principals quickly assigned 30 failing ninth graders to an intensive remediation program. **Now, those “quietly failing students” are completing the year with credits in four core subjects—and are on track to graduate.**

Through the formation of Parent Councils, **families have also expressed a desire to learn parenting techniques**, including how to communicate with their teenagers, the best ways to discipline them, and how to encourage them to succeed in school.

### 1- TO 4-YEAR OUTCOMES

- **Ninth grade students will have no more than five absences.**
- **Ninth grade students will complete credits in at least three of four core courses.**

## United Way of Lake County—Gurnee, IL

**Who:** Approximately 300 ninth graders who were chronically truant in eighth grade and 500 tenth graders who failed to meet one or more of the following requirements during the first semester of ninth grade: 92% attendance rate, no in- or out-of-school suspensions, and achievement of 5.5 credits.

**Why:** At the Waukegan High School, 30% of students drop out of school prior to their sophomore year.

Focus groups revealed that many of the targeted students' families are unaware of school requirements, are confused about their role in their teenagers' progress, feel intimidated by school personnel, and feel unable to assist with schoolwork because their teenagers had exceeded their own academic abilities.

**What:** Families, schools, and community leaders rallied to improve graduation rates with a comprehensive support package, including:

- Schools will offer a fall orientation to inform incoming freshman and parents about attendance and graduation requirements, the online data system, and school-career connections.
- The project will implement a "Soccer on Sundays" program for truant students and their fathers. This program will launch during next summer's orientation and will include soccer games, a barbeque, a team-building activity, parent sessions on supporting teenagers, and student attendance contracts.
- Parents who complete a training series on Infinite Campus, the school's new online student tracking system, will take home a refurbished computer. Other families will be directed to several community computer access points. A bilingual messaging campaign will encourage involvement.
- Family resource coordinators will help families feel welcome at the school and inform them of their students' progress and of affordable, local youth activities.
- Teachers will reach out to families through parent-teacher conferences and, starting in the third year of the project, teacher home visits.
- Teachers and family resource coordinators will participate in family engagement and diversity training taught by volunteer diversity-training officers from community-based businesses.
- Community partners will provide students with ongoing academic help through an internet-based homework and mentoring support program.

### Innovations

- New "Soccer on Sundays" program will combine fun with information and encourage fathers to engage with schools.
- Community partners will donate refurbished computers to families that complete a computer workshop about the online student data system.
- A bilingual "Check Your Child's Progress" public media campaign will raise awareness of the importance of graduation.

### EARLY OUTCOMES:

With the AT&T grant, the United Way brought together the Latino Leadership Council, the Waukegan High School Faith Council, and the Hispanic Institute to develop a comprehensive fall freshman orientation for the 2010–2011 year. **For the first time, the 300 incoming freshman and their parents will receive user-friendly information about attendance and graduation requirements, the online student data system, and the school-to-career pathway.**

### 1- TO 4-YEAR OUTCOMES

- **Ninth and tenth graders will achieve a 92% attendance rate.**
- **Students will stop earning in- and out-of-school suspensions.**
- **Tenth graders will achieve 5.5 credits.**

## United Way of the Bay Area—San Francisco, CA

**Who:** In AY 2010–2011, the project will serve between 100–250 ninth-grade students and families, and another 100–250 rising ninth grade students by the spring, prioritizing the 100 most vulnerable.

**Why:** The Philip and Sara Burton Academic High School had a 48.1% graduation rate in 2009. Significant obstacles exist for families, including lack of information about the school system, language barriers between staff and families, and a general lack of understanding about the importance of family engagement.

**What:** The AT&T Grant has enabled families, school staff, and community partners to come together in support of student achievement and to develop a family engagement project for the school. The project includes a network of supports and resources, including:

- Disparate school and community services are coming together to develop Philip and Sara Burton Academic High School into a whole “community school.”
- This community school will partner with Beacon Schools, a community organization providing educational supports to students and families, and GEAR UP, a college and career prep program for ninth and tenth graders and families.
- GEAR UP will create a ninth-grade curriculum centered around college readiness for families and will train parent liaisons and community partners to provide additional support. Beacon and GEAR UP will also partner with other programs, such as the University of California’s Early Academic Outreach Program, to further enhance students’ college readiness.
- A family engagement team of staff, students, families, and community partners, led by the parent liaison, will reach out to families about workshops and events and will assist with translation.
- The team will work with community partners to establish a parent resource center to provide college and career planning information and support services (such as English and GED classes for parents), as well as computers to access online student data systems.
- Beacon Schools will provide ongoing workshops and information about graduation requirements, and will train parents about the online data system.

### Innovations

- A parent resource center will be established to provide a one-stop shop for computer access, support services, and classes for parents.
- Families will be offered tools to help support teenagers’ goal-setting. Information will be provided in multiple media (phone, in-person, video, online) and activities will be scheduled to accommodate parents’ work schedules.

## EARLY OUTCOMES

**The school’s ninth-grade teachers formed a freshman academy team which meets regularly to collaborate on instruction, track student progress, and implement support strategies.** The team played a substantial role in the planning process and is committed to ensuring that the family engagement action plan is integrated into the school’s structure and programs. The team is working with community partners to develop the schools’ freshman orientation and is coordinating with the family engagement team to improve home–school communication.

### 1- TO 4-YEAR OUTCOMES

- **10% fewer ninth graders will earn failing grades in the first semester, and 10% more low-performing students will earn a 2.5 GPA or more by the end of ninth-grade year.**
- **Students will accumulate the necessary number of credits to be on track for graduation by the end of ninth grade and will make progress in meeting the academic requirements for applying to California public institutions of higher education.**

## United Way of York County—York, PA

**Who:** 100 rising ninth graders at risk of dropping out due to truancy, repeating a grade, having more than one suspension in 2009–2010, or scoring poorly on the state NCLB test. The focal student population also includes 15 ninth graders enrolled in a program that serves students who are not successful in a typical school environment due to severe truancy and behavior problems, among other reasons.

**Why:** York County School District’s graduation rate for 2005–2006 was 36%; a rate that has been consistent for the last decade.

Students and families feel that communication with school personnel is poor. Families seek more contact with teachers, more information about how students are performing, and how to support them.

**What:** The project built upon an existing dropout prevention initiative and included an extensive planning process that engaged three major community service organizations, a judge, religious leaders, and school personnel to develop a set of integrated supports, including:

- The schools will include families in the Link Crew program, which provides an orientation and ongoing support from upperclassmen to freshmen.
- Parents of students in the SWIS program will mentor focal families by providing an orientation session and helping families navigate high school and community resources.
- Focal group families will participate in a workshop in the beginning of the school year to discuss the role of discipline referrals, attendance, and grades.
- Families will receive a new graduation requirement tool that lists all required courses and notes on their teen’s progress.
- Families will be supported in their efforts to set clear expectations regarding their teenagers’ behavior at school through a variety of programs and interventions. School personnel, including the guidance counselors, Title I parent liaison, at-risk coordinator, and the school social worker, will provide individual and group support and case management to students and families.

### Innovations

To improve personal connections, the school will create a booklet with student and staff profiles. Rising ninth-graders will write a brief biographical essay to introduce themselves to the high school staff, and staff will submit a brief essay that introduces themselves to the students and their families. The booklet will also include a telephone and email directory, school calendar, and a graduation requirement tool.

## EARLY OUTCOMES

To address families’ needs for timely information about student progress and provide easy access to technology, the community created a computer lab and resource center at a local library for use by families and students. School and community partners provide training for parents on using computers at the lab and accessing the online student data system, which is available in multiple languages. **The computer labs are also available to parents for GED preparation, ESL/ELL help, literacy and numeracy, classes, and employment tasks such as resume writing.**

## 1- TO 4-YEAR OUTCOMES

- **Students will earn 6 credits and a GPA of 2.0 or higher by the end of ninth grade.**
- **Students will have no out-of-school suspensions in the next academic year.**
- **Students will increase attendance by 10%.**
- **Students will improve their state scores by 10% by the time they reach 11th grade.**

## United Way of North Central Florida—Gainesville, FL

**Who:** 120 ninth graders and 70 rising ninth graders across five high-poverty urban and rural middle and high schools. The students targeted for this project meet the following risk criteria: more than three absences, two suspensions and/or four disciplinary referrals per month; one or more course failures per grading period; earning less than 80% of the possible credits available per grading period; and earning a low score on the state assessment test.

**Why:** The three targeted high schools have on-time graduation rates of 47%–70%, compared to the district average of 77%. These schools serve many families living in poverty, have low reading test scores, and have high rates of disciplinary referrals and absences.

Parents are often unaware of how absences or behavioral issues impact their teens’ ability to stay on track academically. In addition, parents reported a lack of knowledge of their teens’ class subject matter, as well as a lack of awareness of academic supports that could help them.

**What:** The United Way is focusing on an interrelated set of strategies to address these barriers and help students and families achieve desired outcomes, including:

- The project plans to use the “Check and Connect” dropout prevention program currently in place in two high schools, and expand it to the additional focal high school and two middle schools. The program provides students with intensive support from a dropout prevention specialist who also functions as a family liaison.
- The family liaison will conduct home visits to keep families informed of their teens’ progress and connect them to resources such as financial, health, and other support services.
- The project will provide a community resource coordinator (CRC) for the focal schools. The CRC will enhance coordination efforts among families, schools, and community partners to ensure that all parties are aware of relevant support programs such as tutoring and mentoring services and other organizations that serve families.
- The CRC will work closely with the Check and Connect specialist/family liaison to ensure that students and families most in need of such services are connected to them.

### Innovations

Communication was identified as critical to this project, and will be tackled in these ways:

- Community “cafés” will host conversations for parents about important topics.
- Parent liaisons will reach out to families to bridge the home–school gap.
- Text messaging and the Infinite Campus online system will be used to update parents on student attendance and performance.

## EARLY OUTCOMES

Despite notions otherwise, surveys from the planning process revealed that **families had great interest in helping their students by using tutoring supports and other resources, but did not know how and where to access them.** As a result, schools are working with afterschool programs such as the 21<sup>st</sup> Century Community Learning Centers and Boys and Girls Clubs for further academic support. The CRC will help connect families to needed resources.

## 1- TO 4-YEAR OUTCOMES

- **Absences and disciplinary referrals will be reduced.**
- **The number of credits earned will increase.**
- **State assessment test scores will increase.**
- **Students will have no failed courses.**