

Chicago group set to take parent education campaign statewide

Posted By Dominique Baser On Monday, March 8, 2010

In [Parent and Community Engagement](#)

To outsiders, the fact that a school is performing poorly might seem obvious from the numbers readily available on state school report cards.

But there's a vast difference between the quality of education many parents think is taking place in schools and what students are actually experiencing, says Patricia Watkins, director of TARGET Area Development Corp. and founder of Parents and Residents Invested in School and Education Reform, known as PRISE.

"A kid might come home with A's and B's on his report card, and the parent thinks he's doing well," says Watkins. "But it turns out he's not prepared for high school or college." Indeed, less than half of Illinois high school students enroll in rigorous college-prep curriculum, and about half of community college students must take remedial courses, according to a 2009 report from the policy and reform group Advance Illinois.

To raise parent awareness, PRISE, a coalition of community groups that began working in 2007 to involve parents in the turnaround efforts at Orr and its feeder schools, is expanding its reach outside the city. The effort aims to deepen the knowledge of parents about their schools so they will get more involved and push for improvements.

The new campaign, called SAGE (Statewide Action & Grassroots Education), is slated to launch this April. Local foundations, including The Joyce Foundation and Woods Fund, have committed to supporting this work until 2013.

SAGE has already started working in Decatur, Bloomington, Springfield and Rockford and is reaching out to Winnetka and Aurora. One goal is to work in a cross-section of communities. SAGE plans to provide 225 parents, students and other community members with the training and tools to stay informed on education issues through its Parent Leadership Institute.

Chicago-based organizations like the Academy for Urban School Leadership (which worked with PRISE on the Orr turnaround effort), Advance Illinois, the Civic Committee of the Commercial Club of Chicago, along with 13 groups across the state, are teaming up with PRISE on the campaign.

Through the last half of 2009, representatives from the organizations began meeting to discuss plans of action and recruitment strategies.

Representatives from partner groups outside Chicago note the need for improved parent awareness.

"Parents here are in shock when their kids have to be enrolled in [lower-level] classes in college because they were never prepared," says Ruth Pettiway, board member for the Rockford community development group Hands That Help. "Our school systems have to be revamped, and we're working with SAGE to address this problem."

In Decatur, Pastor Thomas Walker, director of Youth With A Positive Direction, is working to recruit faith-based organizations to get them involved in the movement.

"We're going to take leadership in the district, getting other pastors on board to bring our children's education up from [a] low level," Walker says.

Besides parent education, other goals include 15 cross-community mini-summits to discuss policy priorities and a rally in Springfield to encourage legislators to make a public commitment to its agenda.

Watkins envisions SAGE developing into a consortium of business entities, advocacy groups, churches, education management organizations and social service agencies, in as many Illinois communities as possible.

"We're looking for many different perspectives from groups that share a commitment to getting their kids the best possible education," Watkins says. "We're going to push our agenda statewide. This issue is bigger than Chicago."

Robin Steans, executive director of Advance Illinois, says informing parents about their children's education is a major statewide concern. Her group shares the goal of "creating partnerships to help share the best thinking and best practices so we can all learn from each other how to improve our schools," she says.