

Community and Family-Community Programs

SNAPSHOT

Program:
Making Parents Count

School:
Shanks Middle School

District:
Gadsden County School District

Location: Quincy, Fla.

Grades: 6-8

Enrollment: 610

Free/reduced-price lunch:
92%

Setting high and consistent expectations

Making Parents Count

James A. Shanks Middle School

Quincy, Florida

In 2007, Florida Education Association (FEA) organizer Douglas Harris applied the FEA campaign message, “Making Our Schools a Priority,” to his work in rural and economically depressed Quincy, Fla. Shanks Middle School was a focal point for local change efforts because it had a strong leader committed to increasing parent involvement and its mid-county location could help promote improvement throughout the area.

Harris and a community organization partner guided a series of public conversations with the Shanks community, which led to a wish list and action plan for change that is transforming the school. For the first time, Shanks students now perform above the district average in reading and math. Eighty-one percent of Shanks students are African American. Another 18 percent are Hispanic, most of whom are children of migrant agricultural workers.

“Our goal is to move the school to a higher level by setting high expectations, engaging students in meaningful activities to promote literacy, and using data to drive instruction,” says Shanks Middle School Principal Juanita Ellis.

How the program works

With a \$10,000 grant from the National Education Association, Harris collaborated with Gadsden Coalition for Change, a community-based organization committed to educational equity and social justice, to guide a series of community conversations with Shanks parents and community members. Partners included businesses, media outlets, elected officials, prominent citizens, and members of the school board and PTA. To boost attendance by Hispanic families, the Panhandle Area Educational Consortium, which offers services to migrant farmworker families, targeted its outreach to families and provided translators at all community conversations.

The first community conversation became the starting point for all ensuing activities. To develop and carry out action plans, parents and community members organized the Strategic Organizing Group (SOG), whose members agreed to take responsibility for following up. Because parents’ first priority was improving the school building and grounds—a goal that would unite the whole

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community—the SOG first addressed that need. Some 500 volunteers spent eight days painting walls, replacing floors, installing sod, and planting trees. Their sweat equity and donated materials saved the school district more than \$100,000, and their example inspired students to aim high. The initiative led to further changes coordinated by SOG, with a collective goal to promote parent involvement, increase student achievement, and improve graduation rates.

Evidence of effectiveness

According to the Florida Department of Education:

- ▶ James A. Shanks Middle School earned a total of 508 points on the 2011 Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test (FCAT), moving up from 433 in 2008. The school's grade moved from D in 2008, to C in 2010, and then to B in 2011.
- ▶ The percentage of students meeting high standards in reading and math rose steadily from 2008-09 to 2010-11, as did the percentage of students making learning gains. Students in the lowest quartile made the most notable gains, increasing from 63 to 76 percent in reading and from 66 to 77 percent in math.
- ▶ Despite these gains, the school did not quite make Adequate Yearly Progress for Title I accountability purposes, although the school has met 82 percent of the necessary criteria.

Exemplary practices

Consistently communicating high expectations:

To help the entire community embrace consistent educational principles and practices, the SOG and school leaders developed a nine-point document of expectations for students that is focused on preparing for college.

Ensuring that the PTA remains parent-focused and inclusive: Earlier, PTA meetings at Shanks had been a forum for the principal to report on school business. Under the leadership of Shanks PTA President Gwen Forehand, who is also a SOG leader, parents now run the meetings, freely discuss their challenges, and create student-focused solutions. To ensure that all public meetings at Shanks are welcoming to ELL parents, the district has invested in translation equipment to serve the needs of its Spanish-speaking families.

Agreeing on core values: The community conversations and SOG meetings have encouraged shared values:

- ▶ Respect for the importance of families in raising academic expectations and self-discipline among students
- ▶ Belief that the physical condition of a school has an impact on student and family engagement
- ▶ Commitment to the inclusion of English Language Learners
- ▶ Consistency of educational messages throughout the school, home, and community.

Using targeted outreach: To sustain parent and family involvement, SOG mounted a door-to-door campaign during the summer of 2011 to personally welcome families of students who would be entering Shanks in the fall.

Identifying high-level advocates for change: The SOG has reached out to powerful partners who are willing to promote success at Shanks. These include the chairman of the board of education, the superintendent, the local state representative, and the director of the Gadsden Coalition for Change.

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Starting a service-learning program: Shanks's math teacher Roosevelt Sea secured a service-learning grant from NEA in partnership with FEA for students to plant a community garden. Students will hone skills in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) as well as give back to their community by donating the garden produce to needy community residents.

Outlook

The commitment of the community and its leaders is high, and the school is making steady progress.

Association perspective

The Gadsden County Classroom Teachers Association is a major partner in the effort. Local President Arnitta Grice-Walker says, "Making public our collaborative efforts towards excellence through billboards, use of radio and television, and through active reiteration by the local clergy, has made all the difference in getting us all on the same page—parents, students, and community."

Local contact

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Related information

Florida School Grades: <http://schoolgrades.fldoe.org/>

NCLB Public Accountability report for Shanks:
<http://bit.ly/qVf3e0>

Shanks Middle School website: <http://www.jasms.gcps.k12.fl.us/?PageName=%27AboutTheSchool%27>

QUINCY, FLORIDA



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