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Chicago Urban League Leadership Series: Guest Essayist Dr. Blondean Davis

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Read the latest installment in our regular Leadership Series. This week's guest essayist: Dr. Blondean Y. Davis, Superintendent of Schools, Matteson, Illinois

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WHAT HAPPENED TO THE VILLAGE?

Parents and Community as Partners in Education

The African proverb, "It takes a village to educate a child," has been quoted, parodied, made into a slogan, and even emblazoned on T-shirts. What has been rarely done, however, is to develop a systematic process for bringing the key components of the educational 'village' into an ongoing partnership to deliver a first-class education to each child.

It starts with parent involvement with their child's school and extends to all parts of the community: political leaders, government agencies, churches and other houses of worship, health and social service providers, local and other businesses,

and even fraternal and social organizations. Schools and school districts need to develop effective methods for involving all these groups and individuals with the schools.

The research has been done and the results are overwhelming: parent involvement in children's education is positively linked to achievement. Regardless of family background or income, the greater the parent's participation, the more significant is the impact on student learning. These children also have higher school attendance, show improved behavior, and have better social skills. This is true for preschool, elementary, middle or high school: at all levels, parent involvement enhances students' education.

Clearly, every school should have parent involvement programs. Three components are necessary for successful programs: climate, communication, and collaboration.

CLIMATE is concerned with creating conditions that make parents feel welcomed and encouraged to become involved with the school. Schools need to recognize the differences in parents' backgrounds, education, current work circumstances, and other factors that may impede their ability to become involved. Some parents work long hours and then come home to family responsibilities. Others remember (with trepidation) their own schooling and are reluctant to set foot in the building. There are parents who are uncomfortable communicating in English or are recent immigrants unfamiliar with American customs.

In order to establish a climate of trust and cooperation, schools need to be sensitive to family values and cultural differences and characteristics. Schools need to be aware of the needs of parents to develop their own knowledge and skill and be prepared to offer - or arrange for - special classes to help them. At the same time, schools should encourage teachers and other staff to learn more about the community, its cultures, and its values. The goal is to let parents know that they are valued members of their children's educational village.

Matteson District 162 schools encourage a positive climate by sponsoring numerous events that display students' school work, athletic prowess, and artistic talents. These activities are widely promoted and heavily attended by both parents and community members. As an example, the District invites notable authors to meet with students, parents, teachers, and others for the purpose of having constructive dialogue which facilitates communication on a higher level as they learn together. ***A healthy village learns together.***

In creating an open climate for parents, schools also can put out the welcome mat to the rest of the community. In Matteson District 162, we visit churches, talk with business groups, and regularly meet with the fraternal and social groups. The mayors of the five towns in the District are kept up to date on school affairs. The same is true for the police and fire departments, the Kiwanis and the Rotarians, homeowners associations, and others in the community.

COMMUNICATION is the key to establishing parent and community partnerships with the schools. Good communication fosters the interchange of information, ideas, and issues. This enables parents to better understand what's happening in their children's education. Two-way communication between teacher and parent can resolve many problems and enable them to work together to help the child do better in school.

One of the great innovations of recent years, which we use in every school in District 162, is EDLINE. This internet site is available to schools, students, parents, and the public to share information. Students can receive assignments or can post their papers on it. Parents can check on student progress, missing homework assignments, grades and other information, and can discuss these with the teacher. Teachers can send messages to individual parents or all the parents of their students. They can also share information with each other.

Internet sites and portals like EDLINE have revolutionized communication throughout the educational community. Parents today are familiar and

comfortable with this method and it offers immediate and targeted communication. All serve to build bridges between schools and parents. ***The village needs information in order to be effective.***

A positive climate and good communication will lead to **COLLABORATION** among the partners in education. Collaboration involves having parents help out at school through volunteer activities. But there is more to it. Schools can link parents to health or social services that families may need. Schools can jointly sponsor and participate in community activities with other groups. Recruiting a parent to recruit others and to coordinate events is a particularly effective strategy.

Through Climate, Communication and Collaboration, schools and districts can build a system of parent and community partnerships with the schools to enhance student achievement. At the same time, each of the partners' gains: schools have greater support, parents have a better understanding of their children's education, and the community groups are integrated with the schools to build a stronger community.

The Village still exists. It only needs to be energized, focused, and mobilized.

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