

## Center for College Access and Success Parent Involvement and Engagement Program Model

The Parent Program of the Center for College Access and Success (formerly known as the Chicago Teachers' Center) improves students' academic performance and prepares them for college entrance by increasing parents' expectations and understanding of the educational system. After all, parents are the first teachers of their children. In the final analysis, most students who enter college will do so accompanied by parents or guardians who are supporting the college-going process.

Building trust, understanding, and mutual cooperation with families is the cornerstone of the Center for College Access and Success's approach to developing family partnerships. We value parents' experiences and knowledge through interactive engagement and we have long emphasized the relational approach, placing human relationships and their nurturance at the heart of the school reform dialogue. Strategies in reaching out to parents follow this same paradigm of building openness and trust (Olson, 1998).

The Center for College Access and Success's programs builds upon parents' current knowledge base to address their self-identified goals for future knowledge. Program staff meet the parents as learners, acknowledging that adults possess a myriad of experiences or funds of knowledge to contribute and to build upon. Defined by researchers Moll, Amati, Neff, and Gonzalez (2001), funds of knowledge refers to the "historically accumulated and culturally developed bodies of knowledge and skills essential for household or individual functioning and well-being". The model is assets-based, adhering to the concepts of Paulo Freire: (a) that adult learners/parents have rich and varied life experiences; (b) adults' deep reservoir of experiences must be tapped in order to optimize learning; and (c) it uses problem posing education where people "come to feel like masters of their thinking by discussing the thinking and views of the world... because this view of education starts with the conviction that it cannot present its own program but must search for this program dialogically..." (Wallerstein, 1987). This long history of recognizing families as active, knowledgeable partners in supporting student success is the foundation for an approach that develops respectful, trusting relationships and true learning communities in which families, educators, students and community partners collaborate (Epstein, 2005).

The Center for College Access and Success's parent involvement and engagement model empowers adults to express their concerns, create solutions, and provide leadership to meet challenges throughout their children's education. A wide range of programming grows out of this community-based relational approach. When beginning a school partnership, the Center for College Access and Success initiates opportunities to meet parents through existing parent organizations. Parents participate in needs assessments to help identify community priorities. In response, Center for College Access and Success collaborates with parents to create an array of academic, culturally competent, and social-emotional workshops meeting these needs. Through this process, transformative learning occurs and parents are valued for what they bring to the process. This perspective transformation can cause them to critically reflect on and ultimately change themselves and their children's lives as well (Mezirow, 1995).

