

## Discovering Worth: There's No Place Like an Educational Partnership with Families

*The work of the Carolina Family Engagement Center (CFEC) is focused primarily on underserved families and their students (low income, English learners, those with disabilities, those in foster care, migrants, homeless, and marginalized communities). Housed within the SC School Improvement Council (SC-SIC) at the University of South Carolina College of Education, CFEC provides tools, trainings, and materials statewide through its website and other venues.*

**by Ruth Hill, English Language Arts teacher, Simms Middle School**

*In the movie, *The Wizard of Oz*, the characters discover they have more potential for greatness than they previously realized. The Lion has courage, the Tin Man has a heart, and the Scarecrow has a brain. They just need the right circumstance to exercise their abilities. Dear little Dorothy realizes the worth of family and instills in us the timeless mantra, "There's no place like home." The viewer travels between two worlds – one magical and filled with possibilities, and one in which realistic values and ideals take precedent. Building educational partnerships with families does not need to exist in a fantasy world. Rather, valuable and worthwhile partnerships can be defined in both singular and multiple experiences that help us broaden the feeling of "home."*

One of the biggest obstacles I have encountered in my 26 years of teaching middle school students has been the lack of opportunity for family involvement in middle school children's education beyond a couple of conferences a year. Have you ever wondered what an ideal partnership would look like at the middle school level? It is not a fantasy that our schools' parking lots can be full of eager participants' vehicles ready for Open House events, PTO meetings, book fairs, and other academic and extracurricular events.

The middle school years are crucial. Teachers and their students have a dire need for family involvement. When Dorothy saw that no one paid attention to her and the plight of her Toto (the most important thing in her life), she left. No need in staying around when she felt no one cared about her or her needs. But we do: educators and parents alike. Sometimes we may not feel equipped to help our middle schoolers with the things they are facing. It can feel easier to let them just run along or be alone -- but we must reach out.



Ruth Hill is a teacher at Sims Middle School in Union, South Carolina. She received a B.A. in Elementary Education and an M.A. in Gifted Education from Converse College in 1994 and 1998 respectively. Since her first day as a teacher through the present, her goal is to improve students' literacy and to create activities for family engagement. In 2004, she became affiliated with the Spartanburg Writing Project and credits her reading and writing growth to SWP. She is a proud wife, mother of three, and grandmother to eight grandchildren who are the subjects and inspiration for picture books and young adult novels she hopes to publish one day.

One of the most important ways we can do this is through family engagement activities. When families, schools, and communities work together, every child is successful. We're setting a pattern for them to follow. For many years I have reached out to families so that they could experience writing together. The many workshops I designed have always started with a call to action, "You have a story to tell, let us help you tell it!" And for many years I struggled to find multiple families willing to participate. And then one perfect thing happened to me. I came across a grant in which an organization had my very goal in mind of engaging families to help students become more successful. With the help of the *CFEC* through the University of South Carolina I was able to address this very daunting obstacle with an array of support tactics.

Ms. Julia Beaty was assigned as my liaison in helping me achieve the grand task, and together we put together a plan of action for family engagement activities. We started out with a conversation and built from this seed idea. As we came closer to the scheduled events, she contacted businesses who donated items, presented herself as a wise advisor, a creator of flyers, an instructional coach (for families as well as myself), technology advisor, and workshop presenter (*Had I, myself, arrived in OZ?*). My liaison helped put family engagement quality in perspective. While I thought numbers were the focus, she opened my eyes to see that it didn't matter if there were only a handful of participants, what mattered was the *quality* of engagement for those of us in attendance.

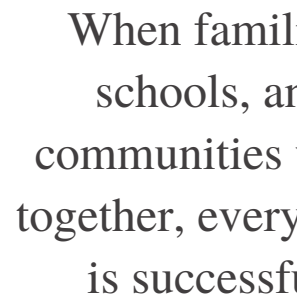
We dreamed together and shared the excitement of planning what we hoped would be *quality* engagement experiences and prepared for whatever the outcome would be.

#### *Quality.*

In middle school, many of our encounters with parents have a habit of becoming an experience dreaded by all involved — parents, teachers, and students. These relationships are key for planning for deep family partnerships. CFEC provided what I needed to have a different outlook on connecting with families, and the experiences that came along the way have made a very enlightening "coming home" event for me, my students, and their families.

#### *Quality.*

Last year's Christmas event families came to share their favorite stories and recipes. We transformed the cafeteria into a winter wonderland. Tables were adorned with green and red tablecloths and ornaments, holiday books were available to read, a Christmas train traveled merrily around a track, and helpful handouts for publishing writing were strewn about. There was a table full of family resources from CFEC and the possibility of sharing with others as the Christmas spirit moved participants. Our decorating team consisted of my colleagues, my liaison, and me. All working beyond regular hours to make things beautiful so that families could physically experience something magical and meaningful.



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*Quality.*

At this event, one mother came with a homemade key lime pie and a message. The topic of how our family recipes sometimes have a story was being presented as she entered, and the timing could not have been more perfect. The mom publicly shared how she made the pie from a recipe she learned in high school from a teacher she had admired. As she was telling her story, feelings of pride and connection filled the room. Other wonderful aspects of the event included a surprise visit (and compliments) from a congressman and active participation from administrators who stopped in to share in the festivities. All participants — teachers, parents, and students — were writing and sharing memories. We all went home a little taller that night.

*Quality.*

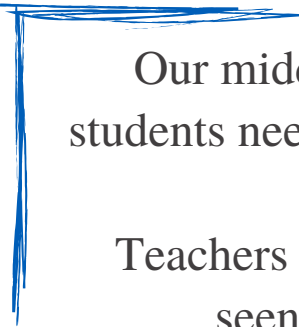
Like the time when our families gave us their hearts in a Valentine's celebration we donned "Gather, Listen, Create, and Share!" One of the workshop events included a session titled "The Healing Power of Journaling: Because Black Mental Health Matters." My liaison led a diverse group of participants through an activity called "Body Mapping." During the event, one of the participants shared the impact of losing a loved one. His mother had no idea he had grieved in such a way. The activity called for participants to circle areas on the handout where they may have experienced something profound. The young male circled the space where the heart would be, and then he wrote about the significance of that circle. He let us in on the grief of losing his loved one. This was a total surprise to his mother who was also writing by his side. The event opened a door for the family to heal together. The impact that family engagement has on a child, witnessed firsthand, is full of visible worth.

Our middle school students need to be seen.

We have to let them know that we see them and that we know what they are going through — from the painful experience of losing a loved one to what may seem like a minor event that weighs heavily on their hearts and minds. They need to know they're not alone and that we care. Our presence matters. Our mantra is "There's no place like Sims, there's no place like Sims." (There's no place like: insert your town/school here.)

Teachers need to be seen, too.

I want to be seen. I want to know that we are cared for and supported and that our time is valued and recognized. Teachers are not only instructors whose classes function live or flipped; we are also caregivers — making sure students are safe in our environment. As always we monitor, adjust, and thrive because we love and care about what we do.



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They want to be recognized when they are experiencing the "coming of age" in their child (and sometimes have several ages in the home at once). They want to be supported through challenges, when setbacks with work, home, and school-aged children make them feel like they "haven't got a heart, a brain, or the nerve."

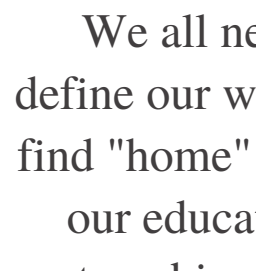
We all need to define our worth and find "home" through our educational partnerships; for it is there where we can be that vital support to one another.

### *Quality.*

"One of the most beneficial aspects of teaching is building positive relationships with parents. Effective parent-teacher communication is essential for a teacher to be successful." (Meador). If we hope to see students grow to their full potential, we need not journey through these middle school years alone. Building educational partnerships with families can be defined in both single or multiple encounters that help us all to experience a sense of home. We all have what it takes to take this journey to its magical end. We just need to concentrate on the quality of the moments we share. In order to be productive we must internalize that #wearebettertogether.


*"But Oz never did give nothing to the Tin Man  
That he didn't, didn't already have... So please  
believe in me..."*

— Dewey Bunnell



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\*\*Meador, Derrick. "Cultivating Highly Successful Parent Teacher Communication." ThoughtCo, Aug. 26, 2020, [thoughtco.com/tips-for-highly-successful-parent-teacher-communication-3194676](https://www.thoughtco.com/tips-for-highly-successful-parent-teacher-communication-3194676).



This story is published as part of a storytelling retreat hosted by the *Center for Educational Partnerships (CEP)* housed in the *University of South Carolina's College of Education*. CEP partners nominated practicing educators, administrators, and system leaders to share their stories. The *Center for Teaching Quality*, a CEP partner, facilitated the retreat and provided editorial and publication support. Learn more about this work and read additional stories by following [@CEP\\_UofSC](https://twitter.com/CEP_UofSC) and [@teachingquality](https://twitter.com/teachingquality).