

**New Visions for Public Schools  
Parent Engagement Initiative  
October 1, 2007**

***CONFIDENTIAL***

**Overview**

Over the past year, New Visions for Public Schools (New Visions) has expanded and deepened our commitment to college readiness by leveraging a powerful but previously underutilized resource: parents. Our immediate goal was to support parent coordinators<sup>1</sup> in engaging parents to act as advocates for students and schools; our long-term goal was to channel their advocacy efforts in the direction of school-wide student achievement and college readiness for all students.

We made exciting progress toward these goals last year, working intensively with 40 parent coordinators and parent leaders from 20 schools, to develop and pilot strategies for increasing parent engagement through the use of student data. Our accomplishments included:

- working with 18 parent coordinators from five New Century high school campuses to help them work collaboratively and develop campus-wide parent engagement strategies;
- facilitating a Parent Engagement Practitioner Network (PEPN) of 15 parent coordinators that focused on sharing parent engagement tools and resources, and on helping parent coordinators understand school and student data as a critical engagement tool; and
- hosting an intensive, 1 ½ day retreat in May for 32 parent coordinators and parent leaders, during which school teams shared strategies and challenges, and began developing parent engagement action plans for their schools based on analysis of student data.

As a result of these activities, we have redefined the very nature of parent engagement. Success is no longer measured by parent attendance at PA/PTA<sup>2</sup> meetings or other events, but rather by the meaningful engagement of parents in driving school wide achievement and advancing the goal of college readiness for all students. Parent coordinators ended the year with a core group of parent leaders committed to this new ideal, as well as action plans to continue moving their work forward.

With a critical mass of parent coordinators and parents ready to invest in the goal of college readiness, New Visions will now work to expand and deepen our work with this population, and to create, test, and distribute resources aimed at supporting their work. The materials and events planned would be part of a campaign targeted to parents of 9<sup>th</sup> graders and emphasizing the need for parents to set high expectations, monitor student progress, and advocate for resources for their own children as well as the broader school community.

**Background**

Since 1989, New Visions for Public Schools has developed aggressive solutions and made improvements within New York City schools by bringing various constituents together to improve

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<sup>1</sup> The parent coordinator position was added to every New York City public school last year. These professionals work in school buildings both during and after school hours and act as an on-site resource for parents.

<sup>2</sup> Parent Association/Parent-Teacher Association

student achievement. During the last decade, New Visions has worked with more than 225 community organizations to establish 120 new, small schools, including the creation of 86 New Century High Schools (NCHS) during the last five years. Our portfolio of small schools provides students and families in the most underserved neighborhoods in the city with choice by offering an array of thematic and career-oriented approaches that engage students in learning based on their interests and ambitions.

During 2006-07, New Visions for Public Schools continued to demonstrate that improving the odds for traditionally underserved students in New York City is possible. In New Visions' New Century High Schools Initiative (NCHSI), the first two cohorts of schools recently posted on-time graduation rates 20 percentage points higher than the citywide average.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, the NCHSI schools are closing the achievement gap between white and minority students. 74% of African American and 70% of Hispanic students in the 2007 NCHSI cohort graduated on time, almost reaching the 77% graduation rate of Caucasian students citywide.<sup>4</sup>

At the same time, recent NCHSI data point to two emerging challenges. First, while the NCHSI graduation data suggest significant progress toward the goal of 80% of students graduating on time, many of these students are not yet ready to succeed in college. Of the 2006 NCHS graduates, just over half received a local diploma<sup>5</sup> and 43.6% received a Regents diploma. If an advanced Regents diploma is used as an indicator for college readiness, the challenge is even more pressing: only 2.6% of the 2006 graduates received an advanced Regents diploma.<sup>6</sup> Second, the NCHSI data also indicate that there continues to be a core group of students who are still not performing at high academic levels despite the effective practices of small schools.

In the upcoming years, New Visions will address both of these challenges as a Partnership Support Organization (PSO) to the New York City Department of Education (DOE). Under a new school governance structure instituted by Chancellor Joel Klein, the DOE has identified New Visions as one of six external organizations—PSOs—of which schools can select one to provide its staff with supports and services. This past spring, 63 schools chose to partner with New Visions, making us the largest of the PSOs.

As a PSO, New Visions both supports and shares accountability with the schools that have elected to work with us. The New Visions PSO network serves approximately 30,000 students at every grade level and in a variety of school structures including 31 small high schools, 5 large high schools, and 14 6-12<sup>th</sup> grade schools. When fully enrolled by 2010, New Visions' schools will serve nearly 40,000 of New York City's students.

Our schools are located across the city—from the Bronx to Staten Island—and the student body is highly diverse, with a majority of students from populations historically underserved by New York

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<sup>3</sup> Please note that going forward the graduation rates will shift as the DOE moves toward adopting the state methodology of calculating graduation rates. Even when looking at the 2007 graduation rates using the state methodology, NCHSI schools' graduation rates continue to be 20% points higher than the citywide graduation rate.

<sup>4</sup> Most recent data as of 2006.

<sup>5</sup> The main distinction between diplomas is performance on the New York State Regents exams. A score of 55 or higher in core subject areas qualifies a student for a local diploma; for Regents and Advanced Regents diplomas, the scores are 65 and 75 respectively. Beginning with students who entered high school in 2005, students must earn a Regents or Advanced Regents diploma in order to graduate, as the local diploma will be phased out.

<sup>6</sup> Most recent data as of 2006.

City public schools. Current data shows that at New Visions high schools, 57% of students receive free or reduced lunch and 78% are either African American or Hispanic.

### **The Need: Parents as Partners in the Work of College Readiness and Access**

The instructional, operational, and leadership supports we offer our PSO schools all align directly with a fundamental organizational commitment: to ensure that students graduate college and career ready.

This is an ambitious goal, and we recognize that we cannot do it alone. One of the key lessons from our work with the New Century High Schools Initiative is the importance of community and family engagement to the sustainability of school improvement efforts over time. The work of moving students to college readiness cannot be done by schools alone—and for some students cannot be accomplished during the traditional school day. Schools, parents and the community need to coordinate and leverage efforts, supports and services in ways that remove barriers to student learning and create opportunities and experiences that will help them access college and be successful there and beyond.

Parents' unique role in the lives of students makes them a powerful lever for improving achievement. With their own children, parents have the power to reinforce the importance of post-secondary planning at home by creating the expectation that students will go to college, helping to keep them on track toward that goal, and seeking resources when they begin to struggle. Beyond that, parents can act as compelling advocates for schools, giving voice to the needs of students and teachers as school communities seek the resources necessary to align their work with the goal of college readiness.

In order to perform these functions, parents need information: what benchmarks must students reach, and when, in order to graduate from high school prepared for post-secondary success? What tests do they need to prepare for? What resources exist in the school and the community for parents – or students – who need help? What's more, they need information *early*. Ninth grade performance indicators such as credit accumulation and attendance predict graduation patterns with alarming accuracy;<sup>7</sup> it is critical, then, that parents embrace college readiness goals and benchmarks as soon as students begin high school. In addition, students and parents must begin planning early in order to complete the tests and course sequences required for a Regents or advanced Regents Diploma.

### **The Opportunity: Building Key Supports into the Work of Parent Coordinators**

In 2006-2007, we began working with a core group of parent coordinators and parents to create the conditions under which parents could effectively advocate for their children and their schools. We learned through this work that parents were eager to have a seat at the table when it came to improving their children's schools, and that parent coordinators were enthusiastic about helping them. We also saw evidence that, coupled with the support of a dedicated principal, the commitment of parents and parent coordinators to contribute to school-wide improvements could lead to exciting and meaningful work. Today, parent coordinators are positioned to impact student

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<sup>7</sup> Allensworth, E.M., and Easton, J.Q. (July 2007). *What Matters for Staying on Track and Graduating in Chicago Public High Schools: A Close Look at Course Grades, Failures, and Attendance in the Freshman Year*. Consortium on Chicago School Research at the University of Chicago.

achievement by enlisting parents as partners in the work of college readiness and access. The work of New Visions over the next year is to help them advance those efforts. To that end, the proposed parent engagement work will consist of three mutually reinforcing strands:

- designing a College Ready Parents' Workshop curriculum, for delivery to 9<sup>th</sup> grade parents, to educate parents about key college readiness benchmarks and resources;
- building capacity among parent coordinators, partners and PA/PTA leaders to reach and involve parents—in particular the parents of 9<sup>th</sup> graders—in ways that help increase attendance, academic achievement, and college enrollment; and
- developing and distributing college-themed materials to 9<sup>th</sup> grade parents in order to deliver important information early and as broadly as possible.

### *College Ready Parents' Workshop*

It is critical that families understand the importance of early indicators such as attendance and credit accumulation, as these have been shown to accurately predict four-year graduation rates.<sup>8</sup> Beyond that, parents need to be familiar with graduation and the college planning and application process. Perhaps most importantly, parents need to know where to go when they – or their child – need help. The College Ready Parents' Workshop will address these critical information needs by providing parents of 9<sup>th</sup> grade students in New Visions schools with information, tools and materials on college readiness/access and what they can do to help get and keep their children on track.

In collaboration with New Visions staff with expertise in student data and college access, the Community Engagement Team has designed a bilingual College Ready Parents' Workshop, which consists of two modules and will be delivered over the course of two meetings held on consecutive days. Workshop modules focus on the graduation requirements for a Regents diploma, introducing parents to the college-ready metric and 9<sup>th</sup> grade courses and skills, and how to plan for college and careers. The workshop will be tested, refined, and disseminated over the course of the upcoming year, according to the following plan:

- In October and November, New Visions will preview the workshop with 8-12 parents at each of three schools. Workshop content and structure will be refined based on feedback from these initial groups to ensure that the needs of parents are met.
- Between December 2007 and February 2008, using the revised workshop model, New Visions will conduct the College Ready Parents' Workshop on a larger scale – with 50-125 parents from 25 schools in each of the five boroughs (participant numbers will depend on the number of schools in each borough). This will be done in collaboration with parent coordinators, PA/PTAs and partner organizations. Due to the large number of schools in the Bronx, Brooklyn, and Manhattan, the workshop will be offered twice in these boroughs and once in Staten Island and Queens (the two-day workshop will be delivered a total of eight times).

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<sup>8</sup> Allensworth, E.M., and Easton, J.Q. (July 2007). *What Matters for Staying on Track and Graduating in Chicago Public High Schools: A Close Look at Course Grades, Failures, and Attendance in the Freshman Year*. Consortium on Chicago School Research at the University of Chicago.

Ultimately, the goal of this work is to generate a parent engagement curriculum model that can be replicated and delivered throughout and even beyond New York City. To that end, we will begin during spring 2008 to train parent coordinators, guidance counselors, other school staff, parent leaders, and partners to conduct the workshops at their schools for parents of incoming 9<sup>th</sup> graders in the 2008-2009 school year. In addition, in collaboration with selected community partners, New Visions will package and offer the College Ready Parents' Workshop at the community level. In order to support this work New Visions will approach local elected officials and businesses to sponsor the workshop for parents in their communities.

#### *Capacity Building for Parent Coordinators, Partners & PA/PTA Leaders around College Readiness*

Building on last year's Parent Engagement Practitioners' Networks (PEPN), New Visions will facilitate the formation of five borough-based PEPNs aimed at building capacity among parent coordinators, PA/PTA leaders, and representative of partner organizations responsible for parent involvement in PSO schools. PEPN work will focus on:

- introducing parent coordinators to New Visions' student data tools and organizing all stakeholders around the goal of graduating students on time and ready for success in college;
- developing strategies to work with parents of incoming and current 9<sup>th</sup> graders to make sure that they finish the year with at least 11 credits and over 92% daily attendance rate;
- involving parent coordinators and parent leaders in the design and implementation of the College Ready Parents' Workshop; and
- peer-to-peer learning and support.

Each network will have 5-20 participants (based on the number of PSO schools in each borough). New Visions Community Engagement Program Officers will plan and facilitate three local meetings in each borough, as well as three PSO-wide meetings. These include a 1 ½ day College Ready Institute in fall 2007 and a Parent Engagement Planning Institute in spring 2008, to be held in conjunction with the New Visions schools retreats, and an end-of-year celebration to be held at New Visions offices.

#### *Development and Distribution of Parent Friendly Materials around College Readiness*

As part of a strategy to reach all 9<sup>th</sup> grade parents even as we develop workshops and other materials on a more limited basis, New Visions will develop, adapt, and broadly distribute college-themed publications in both English and Spanish. Like the College Ready Parents' Workshop, these publications will educate 9<sup>th</sup> grade parents about the importance of college readiness, the key benchmarks and indicators, and the resources available to help struggling students. In some cases, materials already exist as part of New Visions' organizational focus on college readiness. Therefore, the *College Planning Guide* and the *Family Literacy Guide* will simply be adapted for an audience of 9<sup>th</sup> grade parents. A third document, a short guide called *What Every 9<sup>th</sup> Grade Parent Needs to Know*, will be created from scratch; this will highlight for parents of 9<sup>th</sup> graders the steps they can take to help ensure their children graduate college ready.

The goal of the publications is to reach as broad an audience as possible with critical information about college readiness and access. Distribution will take place during parent/teacher conferences,

Open School Week, PTA meetings, College Ready Parents' Workshops, and various community events.

## **Outcomes**

The three proposed work strands will yield a number of tangible products and outcomes, including:

- College Ready Parents' Workshop delivered eight times, reaching an audience of about 1000 parents;
- 25 or more parent coordinators, guidance counselors, and other school staff trained to provide workshops for parents of incoming 9<sup>th</sup> graders;
- 20 or more schools with concrete strategies and systems for working with parents of incoming 9<sup>th</sup> graders around issues of attendance and/or credit accumulation;
- 25 or more parent coordinators who have worked with New Visions in recruiting parents and attending College Ready Parents' Workshops in their boroughs;
- 1-2 College Ready Parents' Workshops offered at the community level;
- Appropriate New Visions materials such as the *College Planning Guide* and the *Family Literacy Guide* adapted and disseminated to parents; and
- 40-45 parent coordinators, parents, and partners using New Visions' school snapshot, student tracker, 9<sup>th</sup> Grade CR Guide for Parents in their work with parents.

## **Conclusion**

We are encouraged by early results of our parent engagement initiative and excited about the future of this important work. Initial investments last year enabled New Visions to test multiple parent engagement strategies using parent coordinators as advocates and allies in the field. With continued support we believe we can ensure that parents have the opportunities and resources they need to become powerful advocates for their children and their schools, and to focus their advocacy on preparing students for success beyond high school.