

Front Line Staff Involve Families in Meaningful, Often Unseen, Ways

By Ruth Anne Landsverk

It's no coincidence that VISTA volunteers often feel as if they are on the "front lines" of involving families in schools and children's learning. In fact, the report, *Partnerships by Design*, from the Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory (NREL) identifies VISTAs as part of the "front-line staff" of those who are the first to see and greet visitors to schools.

VISTAs, along with school receptionists, school bus drivers, cafeteria and maintenance workers, playground monitors, school social workers, and school nurses, often get to know families in ways that teachers never see, the report states. The importance of these people to children and youth, who see them every day, and to families, who may infrequently visit the school, cannot be overstated. The reception that front-line staff give may determine if some families -- especially those uncomfortable with coming to school -- ever set foot in the building again.

How does your Partnership Action Team connect its goals, plans, and activities to the front-line staff? Do they know of the Action Team and its family involvement efforts? Do they feel an important part of the school's mission to help all children experience school success?

Here's an idea to get such a conversation started among action team members. Go around the table and ask members to share a memory or story about how a front-line staff member influenced their or their children's lives. I was once part of a meeting where this activity was conducted and was startled at my own memory that surfaced. I remember crying inconsolably at school in First Grade one day and being sent to spend some time with the school janitor to calm down. Yes, this was long ago when poor Mr. Schultz was probably the only "support" staff member available to comfort crying children. He told me some stories and I remember going back to class feeling much better. Since then, school janitors have always held a special place in my heart.

Here are a few ideas from the NREL report to help your Action Team consider and strengthen its front-line staff's connections with partnerships:

1. Include front-line staff in staff trainings to strengthen family-school-community partnerships.
2. Invite front-line staff to serve as members of the Partnership Action Team
3. In the One-Year Action Plan, spell out exactly how front-line staff connect to improving student achievement and to improving partnerships with families.
4. Develop a whole-school plan as to how front-line staff will work with families and community members.
5. Equip front-line staff with the knowledge of how to work with and assist families and community members.
6. Make it school protocol for front office staff to greet families warmly and to promptly assist them.
7. Survey front-line staff about how they interact with families, where staff could use more support, and about their perceptions of families' questions, needs, and strengths.
8. Recognize and celebrate at school events and events for families the contributions of front-line staff members.

This December, ask your Partnership Action Team to take time to ponder the gifts that each of these individuals offers children, young people, and families. Then, use them!