

Jay Hutchins interviews  
Linda Blaydon Olson and  
Gretchen Dursch  
of Community and Parents for  
Public Schools.

Community and Parents for Public Schools in Portland (CPPS) is part of a nationwide network of grassroots organizations focused on increasing parent, family, and community involvement in public education. Launched in January 1999 as a chapter of Parents for Public Schools, CPPS is part of the only national organization that actively recruits parents to participate in public schools, and advo-

cates for parents taking a role in decision-making, school improvement, and accountability. The group's work addresses an important element of child development—the impact of parental involvement on student achievement. Linda Blaydon Olson is a board member and founder of CPPS, and Gretchen Dursch is a part-time project manager with the organization. CPPS is primarily a volunteer organization and has no permanent staff members.



# schools that work... with parents

**Sockeye:** Your organization supports parent involvement in the Portland Public School system. Why have you decided this is so important?

**Gretchen:** Well, we want to support kids' academic achievement and feel that increasing parent involvement is a way to help all kids, not just kids who already have an advantage. We believe that for children to thrive academically, education must incorporate the entire family and not just be left to the "experts." This is part of a larger trend to view education more holistically and see parents and the broader community as key partners. After all, students spend 70 percent of their waking hours outside of school. The currently popular saying, "It takes a village to raise a child," reflects this thinking.

**Sockeye:** Are you expecting parents to teach their children?

**Gretchen:** No, we should clarify that we aren't expecting parents to "teach" their children—that is the job of the school. We as parents all face a point where we can't teach our children anymore, because we hated math ourselves in school or because we took chemistry so long ago that there is no way we remember it. But we all can be actively engaged in our children's learning. Letting our kids know education is important, supporting them in their learning, making sure our kids are getting what they need at school, helping school administrators make decisions that affect our kids—these are things parents can and should be a part of.

**Sockeye:** I understand there is a whole book explaining the research that supports CPPS's mission.

**Linda:** The large body of research supporting our mission can be found in "A New Wave of Evidence: The Impact of School, Family, and Community Connections on Student Achievement."

About 96 studies are described, all of which support the idea that parent involvement improves academic achievement in all ethnic groups. Parents involved with their kids' education are more likely to hold schools and district administrators accountable to make necessary changes.

The relationship between parental and community involvement in education and academic achievement holds across economic, racial, and educational backgrounds. At all levels, the education community is looking at the research and embracing the belief that involved parents make better schools.

**Sockeye:** What about No Child Left Behind?

**Gretchen:** As you know, No Child Left Behind is hotly debated. However, one good thing about it is that it mandates that all Title I schools, which are higher poverty schools that receive federal funding, have a plan for increasing parental involvement.

*[PPS elementary schools in which 40 percent or more of students receive free or reduced lunch get federal Title I funding.-ed.]*

And in Oregon, under state law, school districts are required to set up site councils for each of their schools, which comprise the principal, teachers, members of the community and, students at the high school level. The site councils are required to come up with school improvement plans. Our district now requires that a component of those school improvement plans be a Parental Involvement Plan.

**Sockeye:** I understand that Chalkboard Project also has made recommendations for parental involvement in schools.

**Linda:** Yes, the Chalkboard Project—which I should explain is a nonprofit organization that has spent two years conducting "best practices" research

state-wide, polling the public, and leading focus groups and workgroups—has sought to find out what Oregonians want for their schools and what methods of reform have proven to be effective. Chalkboard has recommended a set of initiatives the group believes will significantly improve Oregon schools.

Two of the six initiatives are focused on increasing parent involvement in public school education. One is Running Start, which includes training for both school personnel and parents and is aimed at improving student achievement among the most at-risk youth.

Another is a push to develop school partnerships between individual districts, local businesses, and parent groups. These initiatives are in line with the work of our national organization [Parents for Public Schools] of 20 chapters in 14 states.

**Sockeye:** How do the schools in Portland respond to your proactive mission?

**Linda:** Very positively. Most school administrators believe in the link between achievement and parental involvement, but just aren't very effective at increasing it. Last spring we did a Parent Involvement Assessment Project where we went into 11 elementary schools that reflected the diversity of families found within PPS and talked to the principals, staff, and parents about parent involvement. We found that a lot of principals really want to involve parents and understand its importance, but teachers and principals are not trained to effectively engage parents.

**Sockeye:** Are there any turf issues?

**Gretchen:** Unfortunately, many schools, though they understand the value of parental involvement, have struggled to work within the mandates of NCLB and the requirements for site councils. While most staff and administrators want parents more engaged, it is often difficult

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for them to share power. And real partnership means that.

Sockeye: What about all the planning for site councils and other mandates?

Gretchen: Many schools don't have functioning site councils with parent representation. Many of the documents they develop are not dynamic working plans, but rather a document written to meet a mandate to write a plan—and that's all.

Sockeye: Are the site councils funded properly?

Gretchen: Even though mandated by law, most schools don't have funding for training the councils. We encourage the district in Portland to put more emphasis on providing such training. In addition, we've been working with individual schools to help them set up functioning site councils. Site councils have been a long-time focus of our work—they are a critical way parents partner with the school to make key decisions affecting children.

Sockeye: I know you have a current project you would like to talk about.

Gretchen: Absolutely. Our current undertaking is the Parent Involvement Curriculum Project. During the Parent Involvement Assessment Project that we mentioned earlier, we heard from parents of all ethnic and economic backgrounds that they wanted more support in how to be engaged in their children's learning. We heard over and over again that parents basically feel they are told to read to their children and not much else.

Sockeye: In the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study done in 1998 by the U.S. Department of Education, the data showed no positive correlation between just reading to kids in the home and academic achievement. The

study was huge and included 1,000 schools and 20,000 kids. Steve Levitt and Stephen Dubner write about it in “Freakonomics.”

Linda: This would be a good time to mention the “Atlantic Monthly” article I just read. Lack of funding for research and development in K-12 education is a problem overall. The government now spends \$28 billion annually on research at the National Institutes of Health, but only \$260 million—not even 1 percent of that amount—on R&D for education.

Gretchen: Our current project will work in three low-income schools to develop ways to engage parents much more in their children's learning. Parents at the three schools will identify and help design what they think they need to support their children's learning at home. We will see what works and what doesn't, and then work with the school district to develop a strategy for taking the project to scale across the district.

Sockeye: When we think of parent involvement, we often think of the middle-class parent who has the resources and the education to proactively advocate for their children and their school—to be the “squeaky wheel,” so to speak. I heard a lot about this from district superintendents when we put together our issue on school choice, specifically in relation to magnet schools. How is CPPS trying to expand parent involvement to different socio-economic groups?

Gretchen: This is an important issue, and if we as a community are serious about closing the achievement gap, we need to increase parent involvement in all economic and social groups. Because of their own experience with the school system, a lot of parents are intimidated by schools. School may have been a place they did not feel successful or that they felt was too authoritarian. Their comfort level is low.

The feedback we get from parents is that the schools need to create a more welcoming environment, to reach beyond the parent who is already comfortable advocating for their child. We picked three low-income schools that reflect the diversity within PPS for our current project to specifically address this issue.

**Sockeye:** Why do schools tend to have problems focusing on the issues of the kids with the highest needs?

**Linda:** Schools are overwhelmed, in many cases. There is much more diversity in Portland Public Schools than many people are aware. As part of the Parent Involvement Assessment Project, we talked to the staff and parents at Rosa Parks in North Portland. They were struggling to find a translator for Somali families. Usually the kids can translate for the parents, but in this case, they had only just arrived from a refugee camp in Egypt and didn't speak English yet.

A Somali mother told us that her parents had been very involved in her education, but there had been no school in the refugee camp. She was very committed to helping her children. Because this school had not had Somali families before, they were struggling to find ways to even communicate with these families.

**Gretchen:** We discovered that the staffs at individual schools have had to be very creative to address these issues. A principal at one school found out the school cafeteria had hired a worker who spoke Russian, so he had her translate for Russian-speaking parents.

**Sockeye:** It must be hard when no Russian-speaking cafeteria workers are available.

**Gretchen:** Immigrant families are very invested in their kids' education, and we want them to be involved in their children's school, but there often isn't any support. One principal we know called

around to the universities to get help understanding the issues of some of her immigrant students who had lived in refugee camps—in other words, what might be anticipated in the way of behaviors and challenges in her group of non-English-speaking students. She found no resources within PPS.

**Sockeye:** What needs to be done to help this situation?

**Gretchen:** Because there are limited resources from the district to deal with these types of problems, the schools have reacted in a decentralized manner. What we would like to see is centralized support within the district for schools, so that each school doesn't have to figure it all out on its own.

**Linda:** There are enough schools with Somali populations, for example, that the districts should have some centralized resources such as a coordinator for outreach efforts for Somali families.

**Gretchen:** There are not enough translators. About 80 different languages are spoken by students in Multnomah County. Beaverton is putting kiosks in with computers used to hook up families with a translator. We need to get even more creative.

**Sockeye:** I understand that Multnomah County has a support program for parental involvement.


**Linda:** You are referring to the SUN Schools.

**Gretchen:** The SUN Community Schools are a collaboration of Multnomah County Department of Human Services, the City of Portland Parks and Recreation Department, local nonprofits, and local school districts. SUN Schools are community schools that actually expand the use of neighborhood schools by engaging students and families who are using health and

social services. The Sun Schools are a great example of a holistic approach to education. Many of the services are open to the entire community. We think the Sun Schools are a good example of an intervention that is useful for getting parents and communities more involved in the school.

**Sockeye:** And get the school more involved with the community perhaps? Any last words about parental involvement?

**Linda:** Our organization focuses on educating and empowering parents who may be apprehensive about the system and lack the resources to become involved in it. Our goal is to break down the barriers and give them support and training to become a partner in their child's educational experience. Parents with the confidence and skills to advocate for their children can provide them with more opportunities.

**Gretchen:** Our mission is really simple. School staff need to see parents as true partners, not clients or merely guests visiting their schools. We come at it from two angles. We work with the school district to make schools more parent-friendly and we work with parents to become more involved with the academic life of their children. 

*[The "Atlantic Monthly" article Linda Blaydon Olson mentions is "First, Kill All the School Boards," published in the January/February 2008 issue. It advocates nationalizing schools and setting clear external standards while granting real discretion and reasonable resources to schools to meet them. This approach has been effective in European countries. The article is written by Matt Miller, who bills the article as a modest proposal to fix the schools. The article makes more than a few excellent observations.—Jay Hutchins]*