

Boston College



BOSTON COLLEGE AND WATERTOWN SCHOOLS TO COLLABORATE ON INCREASING FAMILY ENGAGEMENT

New Partnership Will Identify How to Attract More Diversity in Families Who Actively Participate in Children's School

(Chestnut Hill, MA) November 3, 2015 - In an effort to encourage more participation among families in their children's schools, Watertown Public Schools is forming a pilot-program partnership with faculty at the Boston College Lynch School of Education to identify how to attract more diversity among families who actively participate in school programs and events. The first research collaboration of its kind between the town and the Lynch School is made possible through a grant by the Collaborative Fellows Program of the Lynch School.

"I'm delighted to be partnering with the Boston College Lynch School on this important initiative," says Dr. Jean Fitzgerald, Superintendent of Watertown Public Schools. "I believe that a strong school community is built through the positive connections we make with the families of our students. The collaboration between the Lynch School and the Watertown Public Schools will shine a light on the strengths and opportunities for increasing those connections and expanding family engagement here in Watertown."

"Administrators in the school district have noticed that some families, often those more established in the community, are very engaged in schools - they come to all the parent-teacher conferences and are active members in parent-teacher organizations, the school-site council, that kind of thing," says Lynch School Assistant Professor of Educational Leadership Rebecca Lowenhaupt, Ph.D., lead researcher in this project. "But other community members are much less likely to become involved."

Dr. Lowenhaupt says her team, which includes middle school assistant principal Jason Del Porto, school district administrators, and researchers from the Lynch School, will undertake a system-wide needs assessment of family engagement using focus groups, data analysis, and conversations.

“The first stage of the work is to talk to different community groups and community members about their experiences with public schools and if they’re not participating, why? What could the school do differently to welcome them more?,” says Dr. Lowenhaupt. “We’re also collecting information about some of the exciting initiatives schools have recently implemented to increase family participation.”

Watertown’s schools educate roughly 2,600 students in K-12, a third of whom come from families where English is not the primary language. In fact, the town is home to 35 different languages.

“Watertown Public Schools wants to try and make sure they’re reaching the different members of the community and engaging everyone in the district,” says Lowenhaupt.

“As the liaison between Watertown Public Schools and Boston College, I look forward to facilitating meaningful conversations about this issue in the district,” says Del Porto.

The Lynch School-led team will take the data and come up with a strategic plan and new initiatives to get more families involved; the hope is to have new solutions ready by next summer for a problem that’s not unique to Watertown.

“Many school districts are faced with this issue,” says BC’s Lowenhaupt. “This is a common problem - school districts trying to find innovative ways to engage families, particularly immigrant families who are not used to working with a school system.”

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