The Dallas Independent School District (Dallas ISD) received federal funding under Title I, Part A to provide services to help parents increase their involvement with their child’s education. The district distributed these funds between the School Leadership Division and the Communications Division.

School Leadership Division funding was used to pay for five Parent Resource Specialists (PRS) assigned to each of the divisions. Communications Division funding was used to fund a workgroup called Community and Family Relations.

During the 2012-2013 school year, each of the School Leadership Division feeder patterns was assigned a PRS reporting directly to the Assistant Superintendent in charge of the division. At the same time, a Central Staff workgroup in the Communications Division called Community and Family Relations (CFR) was assigned duties intended to foster increased parental involvement in the schools.

In order to make certain that assignments and areas of responsibility were clear, the Chief of School Leadership and the Chief of Communications met, along with appropriate staff, and worked out an agreement where Site Based Decision Making (SBDM) training and campus support was to be handled by the Parent Resource Specialists. Further, the Grants Department would handle Title I Parent Involvement training, assisted by the PRS, who would offer technical training at the campus level. The PRS would also handle parents’ administrative complaints and other campus-level duties. The CFRs would handle the more strategic programs such as the Parent Leaders Program and the PREP University Workshop Series, and other district wide activities. Even with these efforts, when asked directly in interviews, both groups reported there was sometimes tension between them regarding areas of responsibility.

After responsibilities between the School Leadership and Communications Divisions was determined, the individual PRS came together and held similar meetings to develop regular PRS procedures that fit their operational needs and helped standardize procedures across School Division lines.

School Leadership Division Parent Activities

In year 2012-2013, the School Leadership Division received $355,830 in Title I, Part A funds to pay for five PRS, one for each School Division. These specialists reported directly to the Assistant Superintendent leading the division to which they were assigned. PRS generally worked directly with parents in a one-on-one problem solving or training role. PRS also provided opportunities for parents to become familiar with the district’s policies and procedures, serving as guides and facilitators through whatever procedural steps were necessary to address the parents’ concerns. PRS, often in conjunction with their respective Executive Directors, also presented more formal training programs on the application of district policy, including Site Based Decision Making (SBDM).

The PRS were directly concerned with parents and their encounters with schools. Examples of what these specialists encountered are:

- parents concerned with the air conditioning at a particular building,
- concerns with how a particular course is being delivered in a school,
- general maintenance concerns, such as peeling paint or replacing broken windows promptly,
- and other concerns a parent may have regarding their children’s experience with the Dallas ISD.

PRS were able to access district databases on a limited basis to help them prepare for meetings with parents on issues such as a student’s attendance and what the district expects, and why that is important. PRS reported that sometimes parents did not expect anything to change when they call; they just wanted to get their concerns out into public view. PRS personnel saw a major part of their job as making the schools more user friendly for the parents.

Careful review of the PRS activity logs showed that these individuals were placing themselves front and center, available to parents when they had questions, and for preparing and delivering training presentations as needed. Many of the Executive Directors of the district’s feeder patterns were very active with their PRS and took a lead role in
activities to improve the way schools were viewed by the community. The PRS sought to present the schools as very approachable. They wanted parents to feel comfortable about coming or calling the school about any problems or questions they may have had about policy or rules at their school, the district or the Texas Education Agency.

Communications Division Parent Activities

The Communications Division received $480,317 to partially fund the services provided by the CFR to parents and other stakeholders. As previously reported, the PRS serve as a parent’s doorway to the district, especially when a parent has a specific problem and was lost, confused or did not know where to start to solve a problem. In contrast, the CFR specialists were more involved with highlighting or operating programs that run across the district and serve many parents and students at the same time. The CFR has developed a comprehensive website outlining many of the services and programs available to parents (see http://www.dallasisd.org/Domain/135). Here readers will find links to programs such as Parent Portal, PREP University, STAAR testing information, Parent Involvement and others.

Each CFR was asked to map out their year using a project management tool called Timeline Milestone Tracker. Reviewing these tools made it easy to determine where and how most CFRs spent their time, and thus what programs would most benefit the district.

The success of the PREP Leadership Academy and the follow-on PREP Leaders Program was a major commitment from the CFR workgroup. This was a program aimed directly at parents in the Thomas Jefferson and Spruce feeder patterns. The PREP Leadership Academy provided training for parents on how to work with other parents, and to improve parental involvement in the targeted feeder patterns. Training was bi-weekly half-day (9-12) meetings, beginning in January and running through April, that addressed the needs of parents and students in the targeted schools. Topics ranged from “Empowering Parents for Student Success” to “Teaching Your Child to Respect Differences” and many more. The website calendar showed more than 40 sessions were available. At the end of training, parents were given a binder filled with information covered in the Academy training, along with suggestions on ways to structure upcoming events and activities. The binder offered ideas for ways to attract parents to events, such as organizing a coffee with the principal, and other events that might draw out parents. After completing PREP Leadership Academy training, the parents became the leaders of the PREP Leaders Program. This program gave structure to the methods Academy graduates might adopt for planning future events.

At the end of April, 22 parents who participated in this program from January onward were recognized with a graduation ceremony. There were 14 parents who faithfully attended the Academy and remained as leaders in the Leaders Program through the end of the school year. This group of parents became the core group of parents for subsequent years of the program so that recruitment for the 2013-2014 school year did not start from zero.

Another goal was the success of the Parent Portal program, http://www.dallasisd.org/Page/1154. The Parent Portal provided parents with access to their students’ grades, assignments and attendance via the internet. Parents were encouraged to register and use Parent Portal to team with their students’ teachers to help their students succeed in school. The goal for Parent Portal for the 2012-2013 school year was to register 20 percent of district parents with Parent Portal by the end of May 2013. There were 20.2 percent registered at the end of May, meeting the goal.

Another innovative program presented by the CFR was PREP University. In this program, parents provided topics they would like to hear discussed and for which guidance could be provided. The CFR partnered with as many as 25 community organizations to gain materials and information necessary to effectively address the questions parents proposed. In addition, several internal district departments were asked to participate. Both the internal and external partners were asked to provide speakers in addition to materials for the presentations.

PREP University hosted a total of 44 evening sessions running from January through May during the 2012-2013 school year. The program was well received, producing a cumulative total of 809 respondents to exit surveys offered at each event reporting “strongly agree” when asked if the information provided was helpful to them. Attendance through March (31 sessions completed) was 1,472 individuals. Most of those were first-time attendees. District records indicate that around 14 persons attended more than one session in the series.

The CFR undertook a number of other activities designed to boost and support parental involvement in PTO/PTA and other campus level programs. These activities include newsletters, training and providing speakers for events. Speakers might be members of CFR staff, or be parents who had successfully completed training and wanted to be a part of the CFR informal speakers bureau.
Summary and Recommendations

Overall, both the PRS and the CFR provided much needed help to parents. The PRS focused on helping individual parents when they had a problem with a school or the district. These specialists helped parents navigate the bureaucracy of the district to gain the access they needed to address a specific problem or concern, usually at the school level. Examples of the types of problems PRS may address include building air conditioning, student schedules, student disciplinary issues, including bullying and other concerns usually restricted to a single parent or student. Occasionally the PRS may address staffing issues or conflicts involving their student(s).

The CFR provided more formally developed and presented programs, such as Parent Portal, PREP University, PREP Leadership Academy and others. These programs were designed to attract and benefit larger numbers of parents at a single event than the PRS. Where the PRS addressed problems involving the school and community on a one-on-one basis, the CFR addressed more overarching issues with formally prepared programs designed to reach out to the community more as a group.

One sees quite readily that there is fertile ground for overlap in areas of responsibility and other matters. Both the PRS and the CFR specialists provided parents with opportunities to interact with their students’ schools in meaningful ways. The roles of the two groups were very different. The PRS work was primarily one-on-one and designed to help a parent solve a problem, where the CFR specialists aimed more at attracting parents to serve their schools in more formal ways by participating in a variety of activities. The two groups liaise informally, but when asked directly in interviews, both groups reported there was sometimes tension between the groups regarding areas of responsibility. Although these disputes were resolved informally and quickly, going forward there needs to be an ombudsman function serving as liaison between these groups. The PRS also needs a formally structured liaison between the Divisions.

After the end of the school year, on July 1, 2013, the district announced that the CFR program would move administratively from the Communications Division to the School Leadership Division. This move placed both CFR and PRS under the same division leadership. This move should satisfactorily address the recommendations made herein.

For more information, contact Program Evaluation at 972-925-6457.