

Easton area leader pioneers accountability advocacy

When Jean Brown learned that Pennsylvania had enacted a new school funding formula, she wondered how her school district in Easton fared. She starting asking questions and quickly realized that too few people had answers. And so an idea was born.

As an active member of the local NAACP chapter, Brown had a history of civic engagement and knew its value. She saw an opportunity: How could community members engage in a dialogue with the Easton School District to determine how new state funding could be used to benefit the needs of students in the community?

"An education is the most important tool we can provide to our students," Brown said, "and the best partnership to provide that is one that involves students, parents, educators and the community."

With that framework in mind, Brown and a working group of other community leaders met with the Education Law Center to begin the process by obtaining a copy of Easton's PA-PACT plan. Short for Pennsylvania Accountability to Commonwealth Taxpayers, the plan must outline prescribed uses of new funds for proven educational practices that benefit students and must be submitted by every school district that received funding greater than the inflationary index of 4.4 percent.

Once the working group reviewed the plan and learned what the school district had planned for its new funding, they conducted an introductory meeting with the school district. The group of advocates had to reassure school officials that they were on their side, but that they also had many ideas and wanted to be involved in decision-making in Easton's educational programs.

"We realized that we, as community leaders, through our organizations, churches and community associations, had a unique perspective of programs and services that students in the school district might benefit from," said Brown.

The group began meeting with the district on a monthly basis with a sole focus on how the school district could, the help of the new funding, better meet the needs of students from Easton. The group outlined four priorities for the Easton School District: 1) To concentrate on increasing participation in a 9th grade tutoring program – the year in which students are at greatest risk of dropping out; 2) To implement a diversity training program for teachers in a school district with more than 29 different cultural groups; 3) To increase the number of minority teachers in the district; and 4) To raise awareness and increase community involvement in the second installment of Easton's accountability plan, due on April 15, 2009.

"One of our top priorities – increasing the 9th grade tutoring program – corresponded with the district's PA-PACT plan," said Brown. "Of the four priority areas, the tutoring program has made the most progress this year and has been very successful in helping students make progress in their studies and has been shown to decrease drop-out rates."

"For too long there has been a sense in Easton that the school district and the community were separate entities," said Brown. "But our partnership with the school district and the progress that we've made together has just proven that collaboration can be productive when we work toward the same goal."

Most recently, the community working group spearheaded by Brown held a public forum on November 17, and more than 100 parents and community leaders attended, eager to learn more about the Easton School District's new programs and how they too can get involved.

"The public forum was evidence that parents and community members do want to be involved in education," remarked Brown. "With our involvement, we can all be effective advocates for the good our school district does in Easton; we just had to find a way to open up the lines of communication."

But despite the success with the 9th grade tutoring program they've achieved thus far, Brown stressed that their work is by no means finished. "We'll continue to stay involved throughout this year and in coming years to meet success in the four priority areas."

"There are many critics of school districts, but our partnership and work together just goes to show that no one really knows what's going on unless you ask to be involved. We are working together as community members, parents and school leaders to benefit the students who make up this community. They are our future and the future of Easton, and in the end, that is what this partnership is all about."

Other communities interested in working on issues involving school funding, accountability and improvement should contact Good Schools Pennsylvania at (215) 332-2700 or the Education Law Center at (215) 238-6970.