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Feb. 18, 2007
Investigative Reporters and Editors
Ethnic Media Watchdog Workshop – Chicago

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Investigating Education: 3 F's earn you an A

How to move past coverage of school-board meetings to figure out what's working in your community, and what's not.

Families. Build ties to all types, including:

- Upper, middle and low income
- Majority and minority racial and ethnic groups
- New arrivals and natives
- High, middle and low achievers
- Single-parent, two-parent, extended-family
- Pre-kindergarten, elementary, middle and high school
- All geographic areas, especially troubled neighborhoods
- Special education, talented and gifted
- Empty nesters

How?

- School-bus stops in neighborhoods
- Community meetings – PTO, PTA, neighborhood cookouts and events
- Students and student groups – give students a voice in coverage
- Community centers
- Newsletters, e-mail listservs, mailing lists, blogs – sign up for everything
- Social workers
- Neighborhood associations
- Neighborhood police officers
- Groups for families sharing a common interest such as pro/anti-referendum, special education, TAG, backers of specific curriculums

Facts. Build a network of sources and resources, including:

- School board's meeting packets – see what members see

- School board's committee meetings – where facts and discussions flow more freely than in full board meetings. Watch from home on cable, if available, if you can't make it.
- Data analysts with district, local university, education groups
- Teachers union chief and union leaders – state and local
- Maps – know boundaries of districts, school-attendance zones, neighborhoods
- District's power structure – superintendent, assistant superintendents, business manager, public-relations manager, lobbyist
- Principals – they control access to every school
- Security coordinator, in-school officers, security guards
- Bus drivers
- Specialists in literacy, English Language Learners, special education
- Records where mistakes, problems and complaints are documented – upset teachers and bus drivers file grievances, police are summoned to respond to threats and incidents, security guards file incidents
- Internal district data on achievement, demographics, finances, safety and other issues – often more detailed than what's reported to the state. Don't settle for what's on Web – ask for what you need.
- State-mandated data on achievement, demographics, finances
- No Child Left Behind law

How?

- Relentless curiosity – let your instincts guide you
- Remain humble – sources respect you when you acknowledge you don't understand an issue. This opens new lines of communication.
- Newsletters, e-mail listservs, mailing lists, blogs – sign up for everything
- Internal district phone directories – past and present
- Your state's education agency – experts and data. Illinois State Board of Education <http://www.isbe.state.il.us/>, Indiana Department of Education <http://www.doe.state.in.us/>, Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction <http://dpi.state.wi.us/>, Michigan Department of Education <http://www.michigan.gov/mde>
- Education Writers Association www.ewa.org -- stories and resources on many issues, including NCLB
- Investigative Reporters and Editors www.ire.org -- The Resource Center offers more than 70 tipsheets on education coverage and reprints of more than 800 education-related investigative stories, while Extra!Extra! www.ire.org/extraextra offers index to recent education coverage and listservs serve as a resource.
- Education Week www.edweek.org -- outstanding national, in-depth coverage every week, with a state-by-state roundup

- Education Commission of the States <http://www.ecs.org/> -- non-partisan, aims to help shape state policies
- National Center for Education Statistics www.nces.ed.gov -- numbers and data on just about everything, including your local school district. Great for state-by-state comparisons.
- Rural Community and Educational Trust www.ruraledu.org -- source for information regarding rural education
- Educator's Reference Desk www.eduref.org – resources including searchable ERIC research database
- Minority Student Achievement Network www.msanetwork.org -- coalition of multiracial districts striving to shrink the racial achievement gap
- Legislative study panels and primers for incoming legislators – summaries of issues

Fun. Sure, these are serious issues. But lighten up, a little. . .

How?

- Need to form connections with families in a troubled neighborhood? Volunteer to help deliver Thanksgiving turkeys.
- Need to build ties to students? Invite them to Saturday pizza parties. Recruit them to write diaries focusing upon specific issues.
- Need to interview a family whose children are enrolling in a program to help them be ready for kindergarten? Go to their home, ask about the children's favorite toys and get down on the floor with them. Be a polite guest and, if it's offered, eat the brownie.
- Need to describe how a reading program works, or how budget cuts are affecting students? Use a recorder to capture dialogue, including the thrill of victory, and develop students as characters in your coverage.
- Need to explain the state's school-finance system? Make it into a game that readers can play on your front page and online such as this one at <http://www.madison.com/wsj/spe/SqueezingSchools/>