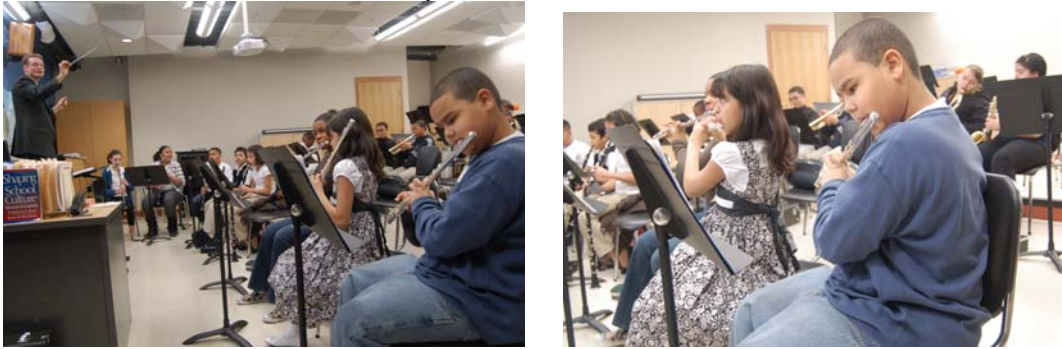


Barnum School Kick-off Celebration

By Robert A. Frahm



BRIDGEPORT -- Despite uncertainty about its future, a new school reform program got off to an enthusiastic start with a large crowd of parents, teachers and community leaders at Barnum School on February 4.

More than 200 people turned out for a program celebrating the state-sponsored CommPACT program, an experiment that started last fall at Barnum and seven other urban public schools across the state.

Officials worry that the project's momentum could be blunted by a state budget crisis but are hopeful that early signs of support, such as the Barnum kickoff celebration, will convince lawmakers to continue its funding.

CommPACT, headed by the University of Connecticut's Neag School of Education, is designed to improve selected schools in the state's largest and poorest cities. Instead of the usual district-centered control of schools, CommPACT allows individual schools to make decisions on matters such as staffing, school schedules and curriculum.

"Decision-making takes place with teachers, parents and the community rather than top-down," said Barnum Principal Lourdes L. Delgado. "This event is a perfect example. Parents have helped in every aspect of this," she said, adding that teachers handled invitations and planned activities.

Families packed the school cafeteria for a standing-room-only student awards ceremony while other visitors viewed exhibits or listened to choral and band performances throughout the school.

Although the five-year project is still in its first year, some teachers and parents say it has begun making a difference.

"It's a little early to notice a difference in the [academic] data, but as far as being a cohesive staff, we're all focused. I think teachers feel a lot more comfortable speaking about whatever is on their mind," said Gary DeBrizzi, a fifth-grade teacher.

Claudia Emilaire, the mother of a kindergartener and co-president of a parents group, said, "You're able to get involved in things you see need to change."

The kickoff attracted community leaders such as Philip E. Miner, a biophysicist at Unilever, a company that makes a range of household products. Miner, who runs a monthly read-aloud program at Barnum, said CommPACT brings together "the people who matter" to govern the direction of the school.

“I think it’s a great idea,” he said. “It clearly seems innovative and a rational approach to education.”

Also attending the kickoff was state Rep. Andres Ayala, D-Bridgeport, who said he was disappointed that Gov. M. Jodi Rell did not include funds to support the program in the lean state budget proposal she had unveiled earlier that day. The matter is now before the legislature.

“Look at the turnout,” Ayala said. “Every teacher I’ve spoken to raves about CommPACT. ... We’ve got to do everything we can to save it.”