

## CommPACT alliance cited as boost for urban schools

By John Burgeson, Staff Writer

Updated: 05/13/2009

BRIDGEPORT ---- Teachers, parents and school administrators -- historically, a contentious lot -- are working together in a new University of Connecticut-inspired push to improve inner-city schools.

The program, called CommPACT, is in eight schools statewide, two of which are in Bridgeport ---- Longfellow in the West End and Barnum on the lower East Side. The others are in Hartford, Waterbury, New Haven and New London.

CommPACT stands for "Community of Parents, Administrators, Children and Teachers," and it's a program that might be adopted nationwide, according to a number of local and state school officials and other interested parties who met Wednesday at both Longfellow and Barnum schools.

"As I talk to people at the national level, there are a lot of ideas out there, and CommPACT has all the components of success," said Dennis VanRoekel, president of the National Education Association, the largest teacher labor union in the United States with 3.2 million members. "It has the involvement of the community, parents, administrators, students and teachers ---- that's the formula for changing the world."

Even though CommPACT was established only last fall, school officials and teachers agree that it has already produced tangible results. This includes greater participation of parents, many of whom are reluctant to get involved in inner-city schools, as well as improved student behavior.

"It's working out well," said James Adams, principal of Longfellow, which was built in 1958 and has about 440 pupils, most from the P.T. Barnum public housing complex across the street. "It's really a five-day-a-week professional development program for the teachers ---- they're thinking outside of the box. They're getting to know the parents and making administrative decisions. We're building true academic capacity here."

Richard Lemons, the director of UConn's Institute for Urban Schools Improvement, said that CommPACT erases the "zero-sum politics" mindset.

"That's the idea that 'If I don't win, I lose, and if you win, I lose,' " Lemons said. "The idea of getting these various parties together to wrap their heads around one of the most vexing dilemmas in the United States ---- urban schools ---- is pretty impressive."

The role of UConn is important, officials said, because it's a "neutral party," which can get the various entities to work together.

Richard Schwab, dean of UConn's Neag School of Education, said that Supt. of Schools John Ramos deserves credit for "having the courage" to sign on with CommPACT, which cedes some administrative decisions to the faculty. "This has worked out fabulously," he said. "If we don't prepare teachers and administrators to work in urban districts, we shouldn't be in the business."

CommPACT is funded by a \$480,000 grant from the state's General Assembly, and Schwab said that securing the money was not easy.

"But it was worth the effort," he said, adding that the program puts a stop to the "rock throwing," in which teachers, parents and administrators accuse each other for underachieving students. "Now, we put our arms around each other and say, 'What are we going to do?' "

Schwab said that June 10, at the National Press Club, the CommPACT model is going to be identified "on the national level as the wave of the future for schools of education."

Alisha Freelove, a parent of a pre-kindergarten student at Longfellow, said that she has nothing but praise for CommPACT.

"My daughter is a success here," she said. "The teachers have worked with her one-on-one. You'd never know that when she started here she was fighting and going crazy."