



## Large Crowd of New Haven Parents, Students and Teachers Attend CommPACT Kick-Off!

By Robert A. Frahm

Sept. 30, 2008 NEW HAVEN – A school reform movement headed by UConn’s Neag School of Education got off to a rousing start at the Davis Street Comer School Sept. 29 with food, music and a heavy dose of optimism. More than 500 parents, teachers, students and local dignitaries packed the school’s auditorium for a celebration to kick off a project that promises to give the school autonomy to chart its own course and improve its performance.

The program, known as CommPACT, is a radical shift from the top-down, central-office-dominated model common to most school systems. It gives teachers, principals, community leaders and parents greater authority to make changes collaboratively in curriculum, budgets and other matters under the guidance of researchers at the Neag School.

The involvement of those most closely associated with the school, including parents, is designed to create a sense of local pride and ownership in school affairs. Davis Street is one of eight low-performing urban schools across the state to begin the project this fall.

“You are our partners,” Davis Street Principal Lola Nathan told parents at the kickoff celebration, inviting them to “join us in every facet and every component of this process.”

Davis Street, a school of about 400 pre-kindergarten through fifth-grade children, already has a track record of bringing parents, teachers and others into school operations under another school improvement program -- the nationally recognized Comer Process developed by James P. Comer of Yale University’s Child Study Center.

CommPACT takes the process a step farther by securing agreements allowing the schools to operate without the usual restrictions from the central office or employee unions.

“I believe if you can involve parents, teachers, administrators, custodians, unions and everyone together, they can improve the schools,” said Comer, one of several dignitaries at the Davis Street celebration. “We look forward to working with CommPACT and helping out as we can to support the spread of the idea and the work throughout the state.”

Parents and teachers, too, welcomed the idea.

“It makes me feel good to know my child is here,” said Sharon Clemons, whose daughter, Kai, is in third grade.

Renell Pisanelli, the mother of fourth-grade twins Shonell and Jonell, said, “To me, it’s a good thing.” At many other schools, she said, parents “don’t find out anything until after it’s done. It’s been decided for you.”

Under the program, faculty at the Neag School will offer expertise on matters such as curriculum, classroom discipline and even student nutrition.

Julie Browning, a math coach at the Davis Street school, said, “I think teachers are looking forward to the autonomy” and to finding curriculum and other programs that have been proven by research to be successful.

CommPACT is the creation of an unusual statewide coalition of groups including teacher unions, superintendents, principals and others. In addition to the Neag School, coalition members include the Connecticut Education Association, the American Federation of Teachers - CT, the Connecticut

Association of Public School Superintendents, the Connecticut Federation of School Administrators and the Connecticut Association of Urban Superintendents.



Music teacher Lisa Woodard leads violin students in a performance at the kickoff of the CommPACT school reform project at New Haven’s Davis Street School.

The goal is to address the achievement gap that finds many low-income and minority students in urban schools lagging in academic performance – a problem that perplexes schools in Connecticut and across the nation.

The schools selected for CommPACT include Davis Street and Hill Central School in New Haven, M.D. Fox Elementary School in Hartford, Washington School and West Side Middle School in Waterbury, Barnum School and Longfellow School in Bridgeport and the Shoreline Academy in New London.

Among those attending the Davis Street celebration were New Haven Mayor John DeStefano Jr. and Superintendent of Schools Reginald Mayo.

Although he will give up some of his authority over the Davis Street school, Mayo endorsed the reform program. “When you’ve got people who have ownership,” he said, “you’ve got to believe people will come up with good decisions.”

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