Foreword

JoBeth Allen’s new book is the one we educators most need for twenty-first-century schools. In showing how to create partnerships among schools, homes, and communities, this book will help school communities strengthen themselves in their most vulnerable, most overlooked areas. American schools are becoming more diverse than ever before. Immigrant children are the fastest growing segment of the U.S. population, and Latinos are the fastest growing ethnic group. It is increasingly likely that teachers are involved with children from households different from that of their upbringing, and as Allen points out, children from all ethnicities and socioeconomic circumstances may reside in families that have guardians, grandparents, same-sex couples, or single parents in charge of them. We are at the beginning of a new era in American education, one in which school teachers and administrators cannot know enough about the experiences, resources, and languages children bring to school without reorienting the school toward learning from children’s homes and neighborhoods. Because there is more diversity, there is also more need for connection to families, more need of their knowledge and partnership, more need of listening to the people who know their children best. This book provides practical, actionable ways of beginning that work.

The relationships that the author wants us to create in schools have respect at their center. When a school places respect at the center of its relationships with families, the school allows itself vulnerability—the possibility of being affected by others, the possibility of changing even cherished ways. Jerry Harste once said that a person should enter into dialogue expecting one of the pillars of their own thinking to be knocked out from under them in that conversation. Only then would the person be truly inquiring. Schools that enter into dialogue with parents and guardians might find themselves considering their work in whole new ways.
That kind of dialogue, which Allen calls us into, is very different from approaching parents with “expectations” and “nonnegotiables.” This isn’t about getting families to do school at home; it’s about bringing homes and neighborhoods into the language and literacy activities and learning inquiries in schools. This book shows us how to engender more respectful, caring, and engaged partnerships that result in both children and adults learning more. As Allen writes, “I think these would be great questions to write about at the beginning of monthly faculty and or grade level meetings: What have you learned from families this week? What difference has it made for your teaching/students’ learning?” This question, if we all took it on, would change what school means for all our children.

In a time when pressure on schools often leaves educators looking for someone to blame, it is a gift to be reminded that families that lack income do not lack intelligence. People are not poor because of personal or familial inadequacies, but because of the distribution of wealth in our society. For schools to treat families in poverty as if there is something broken in their basic life capacities is more than disrespectful; it is subtractive, separating students from the resources they had before they came to school. This is one of the ways that the poor are made poorer. Allen calls for relationships around schooling that allow students to hold onto their cultural wealth, their family and community connections, their personal experience, and to use those resources in growth toward high expectations for academic success. Children are motivated and strengthened by having family and neighbors supporting them, rather than being taught as if there were something wrong with the people and places they come from.

This book is about people doing things together—about shared thinking, responsibility, and authority, about togetherness and community. A single teacher reading it alone will immediately start thinking of things to do with others, but one of the many strengths of this book are Allen’s extensive roadmaps for colleagues, family, community members, and even students to read this book together and invent ways to live and learn from each other.

—Katherine and Randy Bomer