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Research You Can Use

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Recent reauthorizations, in 1994 and 2001 of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, have mandated an increasing involvement of parents in the educational process for their children. In addition, "educators, policy makers, and parents have begun to call for increased and meaningful involvement of parents in schools. (Cooper, 1999)"

Does parental involvement really make a difference in increased student success? Can all parents positively influence student achievement regardless of income? Are middle school and high school too late for effective parental involvement? Read on for the answers to these questions!

This edition of "Research You Can Use" summarizes some of the key research on the importance of parental involvement. It also identifies potential obstacles to parental involvement, offers strategies for overcoming these obstacles, provides a set of guidelines for building partnerships with parents and other family members, and offers a useful list of websites for more information.

For purposes of this article, the term parent is broadened to include "the adults who play an important role in a child's family life, since other adults, grandparents, aunts, uncles, step parents, guardians often carry the primary responsibility for a child's education, development, and well-being (Metropolitan Omaha Educational Consortium, 1999.)"

Research supporting the importance of family involvement

Henderson & Berla, (1997) state that:

"The evidence is now beyond dispute. When schools work together with families to support learning, children tend to succeed not just in school, but also throughout life. In fact, the most accurate predictor of a student's achievement in school is not income or social status, but the extent to which that student's family is able to:

1. Create a home environment that encourages learning
2. Express high (but not unrealistic) expectations for their children's achievement and future careers
3. Become involved in their children's education at school and in the community."

The research on family involvement in education spans 30 years. It links increased student achievement with the parent involvement in the child's learning. According to Desimone (2001), "parent involvement, especially home- learning activities, high aspirations and authoritative parenting, have been shown to explain key differences in socioeconomic status that further influence student achievement."

Michael-Hiatt, (2001) stated that: "teachers' efforts to involve families promote the following: better student attendance; higher graduation rates from high school; fewer retentions in the same grade; increased levels of parent and student satisfaction with school; more accurate diagnosis of students for educational placement in classes; reduced number of negative behavior reports; and most notably, higher achievement in reading and math".

In fact, the final report from the Longitudinal Evaluation of School Change and Performance in Title I schools attested that:

Students made faster gains in reading when their 3rd grade teachers had been especially active in reaching out to low achievers' parents. Growth in test scores between third and fifth grade was 50% higher for those students whose teachers and schools reported high levels of parental outreach early than students whose teachers and schools reported low levels of parent outreach activities for the third grade.

Low achieving students made greater gains in mathematics when their 3rd grade teachers had been especially active in reaching out to their parents. Test scores in mathematics grew between the third and fifth grade at a 40% higher rate for students in schools whose teachers reported high levels of parental outreach than students in schools whose teachers reported low levels of parental outreach activities.

A recent publication by the National Education Service (2002) summarized the impact of parental/family involvement as it relates to: student achievement, student behavior, and culture and age. Below are samples of the findings for each area:

Student achievement

- When parents are involved, students tend to achieve more, regardless of socioeconomic status, ethnic/racial background, or the parents' educational level.
- When parents are involved in students' education, those students generally have higher grades and test scores, better attendance, and more consistently completed homework.
- Students whose parents are involved in their lives have higher graduation rates and greater enrollment rates in postsecondary education.

Student behavior

- Students whose parents are involved in their education often show improved behavior and have lower rates of suspension for disciplinary reasons.
- Student behaviors such as alcohol use, violence, and antisocial behavior tend to decrease as parent involvement increases.

Culture and age

- Children from diverse cultural backgrounds tend to do better when parents and professionals collaborate to bridge the gap between the culture at home and the culture in the learning institution.
- Junior high and high school students whose parents remain involved usually make better transitions, maintain the quality of their work, and

develop more realistic plans for their future. Students whose parents are not involved are more likely to drop out of school.

Family involvement is critical to the success of students across all grade levels. Sanders & Epstein (1998) found that partnerships between schools, families, and communities create safer school environments, strengthen parenting skills, encourage community service, improve academic skills, and achieve other desired goals that benefit students at all grade and age levels. In addition, Simon (2001), collected data from 11,000 parents of high school seniors. The research findings indicated that regardless of students' background and prior achievement, various parenting, volunteering, and home learning activities positively influenced student grades, course credits completed, attendance, behavior, and school preparedness.

Atunez (2000) cited research that shows the benefit of parent involvement for English Language Learners. (ELLs) She confirmed that language minority students and ELLs in particular, are more likely to succeed when their parents participate in their education by helping with homework, attending school events, conferring with teachers, serving as volunteers, or participating in school governance. She also noted that communities through active participation, help ELLs overcome multiple academic challenges.

Research showing the importance of involving fathers in their children's education is an emerging area. Prior to 1995, little research was done. However, the National Center for Education Statistics (1997) published a report on the links between the involvement of fathers and student success in schools. Two interesting findings emerged:

- The involvement of fathers, as well as mothers in their children's schools is important for children's achievement and behavior. *Children do better in school when their fathers are involved in their schools, regardless of whether their fathers live with them.*
- Children benefit when their nonresident fathers participate in their schools, but not when their fathers just maintain contact with them.

Barriers and solutions to increased family involvement

Legislative mandates and research notwithstanding, schools today face tremendous challenges in developing and implementing partnerships with families. In some schools, particularly high poverty ones, the level of family involvement remains relatively low.

In 1992 The National PTA sent a survey to its 27,000 local and unit presidents and 3,000 council leaders, asking them what barriers they faced when they tried to get parents involved. The chart below recaps their responses (The National PTA, 1992):

Barriers	Percent Giving this Response
Parents do not have enough time	89 percent
Parents feel they have nothing to contribute	32 percent
Parents don't understand; don't know the system; they don't know how to be involved	32 percent
Lack of child care	28 percent
Parents feel intimidated	25 percent
Parents are not available during the time school functions are scheduled	18 percent
Language and cultural differences	15 percent
Lack of transportation	11 percent
Parents don't feel welcome at school	9 percent
Other barriers	21 percent

Breaking Down Barriers: Reaching Out to All Parents.

These recommendations were adapted from a publication by the Iowa Department of Education:

- ***Time.* Solution:** Be flexible when scheduling meetings. Try different times of the day or week to allow all parents to take part at least occasionally. Occasionally make a meeting a potluck to address working parents' needs. Have meetings at community centers, libraries, apartment buildings, places of worship, or other places that parents are likely to gather.
- ***Not valued.* Solution:** Personally welcome all parents, especially those who appear to be withdrawn or uncomfortable. Learn about their interest and abilities. Actively seek opportunities for hesitant parents to use their experiences and talents to benefit the school.
- ***Don't know how to contribute.* Solution:** Conduct a talent survey, then think of ways to use the parents' many talents. Encourage parents to share information on careers, hobbies, pets, or other topics of

interest. Arrange for workshops and seminars for parent and community members on leadership and organizational skills.

- *Not understanding the system.* **Solution:** Write a parent's handbook covering the rules, procedures, and where to find the answers to typical problems. Share information from the handbook at parent meetings.
- *Childcare.* Find an available room in the school or a site close by for childcare. Hire older students or other adults to provide activities for children.
- *Language barrier.* **Solution:** Have printed materials translated—English on one side, another language on the other. Arrange for an interpreter at meetings and conferences. Where possible, use face-to-face communication with the parents. Recognize that it may take several sessions before the parents trust sufficiently to participate in school activities.
- *Cultural differences.* **Solution:** Be sensitive to other cultures' values, attitudes, manners, and views of the school. Be aware of the religious holidays and observances of all groups in your school. Use the resources of community-based organizations to help bridge the difficulties in reaching out to parents of other racial and cultural groups.
- *Transportation.* **Solution:** Visit parents in their home. Hold small group meetings in a community center, at a parent's home, or another convenient place. Arrange car pools and walk pools. Arrange for transportation.
- *Offer of only token participation.* **Solution:** Use parent meetings to look at real issues to gain parents' ideas, and to listen to and consider their solutions. Parents should be involved in the planning stages of a program, rather than after practically everything has been decided.
- *Not welcome.* **Solution:** Arrange for training in parent involvement for all school staff. Make sure that parents are welcome to drop in at school during the day. If possible, have a parent's room or other designated space at school. Post welcome signs in all languages spoken at the school.
- *Resistance on the part of formal leadership.* **Solution:** Be aware of legislative requirements for parental involvement. Ensure that

parents and citizens are involved in planning, policymaking, and implementation of programs.

- *Parents have overwhelming problems.* **Solution:** Provide information and advocacy to help parents secure the services they need, such as food stamps, job training skills, medical treatment, childcare, etc.
- *Low literacy.* **Solution:** Call on the telephone. Contact your library or state department of education to find literacy groups or tutors of English as a second language to do programs. Plan a family literacy program as part of your parent involvement program.

The American Association of School Administrators (1998) also reported several factors that discourage involvement and what schools can do instead to encourage parent participation. They are:

- *Lack of vested interest.* Parents don't see the value of participation. **Solution:** Let parents help choose and plan school activities and services.
- *Intimidation.* Parents who speak another language may feel vulnerable and ill equipped to participate. **Solution:** Offer parents many levels of involvement in services and activities.
- *Being overwhelmed.* The stresses of daily life make parents feel that they can't do another thing. **Solution:** Encourage parent networking and provide other means of social support to reduce parents' stress and feeling of isolation and powerlessness.
- *No concrete support for involvement.* Many parents lack time, childcare, and transportation. **Solution:** Provide childcare, food, and transportation. Schedule activities well in advance and at times convenient for parents.
- *Perception that nothing will change.* **Solution:** Immediately follow up on parent concerns. Publicize change brought about by parent input.

The work of identifying barriers and solutions to increased family involvement is challenging but necessary. Nevertheless, in order to increase student achievement it is important to establish partnerships that sustain involvement over time. Funkhouser and Gonzales (1997) offer these solutions for developing partnerships:

Avoid one-size fits all approaches to partnerships. Build on what works well locally. Begin the school-family partnership by identifying, with families, the strengths, interests, and needs of the families, students, and

school staff; and design strategies that respond to identified strengths, interests, and needs.

Recognize that training and staff development require an essential investment. Provide professional development for school staff and family members. Both school staff and families need the knowledge and skills that enable them to work with one another and with the larger community to support children's learning.

Recognize that communication is the foundation of effective partnerships. Plan strategies that accommodate the varied language and cultural needs as well as lifestyles and work schedules of school staff and families. Even the best-planned school-family partnerships will fail if the participants cannot communicate effectively.

Build in flexibility as an important component of partnerships. Effective parent involvement can take many forms and may not necessarily require parents' presence at a workshop, meeting, or school.

Acknowledge that significant change takes time. It is important to remember that developing a successful school-family partnership requires continued effort over time. Frequently solving one problem brings new challenges.

Web Connections

Center on School, Family, and Community Partnerships:

<http://www.csos.jhu.edu>

Colorado Parent Information and Resource Center: <http://www.cpirc.org>

Connection Collection: School-Family-Community Publication Database:

<http://www.sedl.org/connections/resources>

National Network of Partnership Schools:

<http://www.partnershipschools.org>

National Parent Teacher Association: <http://www.pta.org>

National Parent Involvement Network: <http://www.npin.org>

U. S. Department of Education: <http://www.ed.gov/publications>

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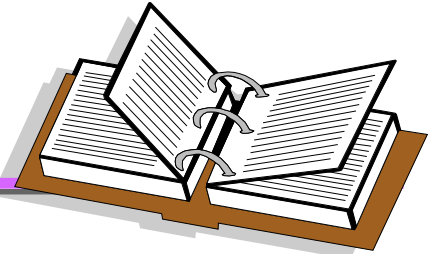
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Upcoming Events

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| April 9 | Consolidated Federal Programs Workshop – Greeley |
| April 10 | Consolidated Federal Programs Workshop – Denver Metro |
| April 12 | Consolidated Federal Programs Workshop – Glenwood Springs |
| April 16 | Consolidated Federal Programs Workshop - Pueblo |
| April 28-May 2 | International Reading Association (IRA) Conference, San Francisco |

FUTURE ISSUES:

April – Ensuring highly qualified staff in every school
May- Reauthorization



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