

*CONNECTING FAMILIES TO SCHOOLS:
WHY PARENTS AND COMMUNITY
ENGAGEMENT IMPROVES SCHOOL
AND STUDENT PERFORMANCE*

Why Parents and Communities Matter for Public School Improvement

By:

Erik Bennett, MSW

2004

For:

The National Center for Schools and Communities

Fordham University

33 W. 60th St., 2nd Floor

New York, NY 10023

Phone: (212) 636-6699

Fax: (212) 636-6033

CONNECTING FAMILIES TO SCHOOLS: WHY PARENTS AND COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT IMPROVES SCHOOL AND STUDENT PERFORMANCE

Why Parents and Communities Matter for Public School Improvement

The research evidence is overwhelming that when parents and communities are involved in their children's public schools, student achievement increases and school morale improves. Indeed, when many other reforms have failed to make a dent in the performance of public schools, parent and community engagement strategies have consistently produced results for students, teachers, parents and communities.

Documented benefits for students include higher grades and test scores, better attendance, fewer special education placements, higher graduation rates, and greater enrollment in and completion of postsecondary education. In schools and districts where parents are strongly involved in school, parents also rate their teachers more highly, and teachers' job satisfaction improves. Such schools also enjoy better reputations in their districts and communities.

1. Specific Benefits

A review of 44 studies found that in the programs examined, student achievement increased directly with the duration and intensity of both parent and community involvement: the greater the involvement, the better the students performed in school. The studies also showed that extensive school involvement of low-income parents can raise their children's educational achievement to the levels expected of middle-class children.

Benefits of parent involvement:

- Teachers have higher expectations of students whose parents collaborate with them (Lareau, 1997; Snow, et al, 1991; Stevenson & Baker, 1987).
- High levels of parent involvement in African-American communities correlate with improved reading achievement (Armor, 1976).
- The degree of parent and community interest in quality education is the critical factor in explaining the impact of the high school environment on the achievement and educational aspirations of students (McDill, 1969; Wagenaar, 1977).
- Students do their academic best when their parents play four key roles simultaneously – teachers, supporters, advocates and decision makers (Gordon, 1979; Leler, 1987).
- The children who are the farthest behind make the greatest gains in schools with extensive family involvement programs (Cochran & Henderson, 1986; Irvine, 1979).

Benefits of community involvement:

- Community organizations help to develop and sponsor affordable and quality after-school, weekend and summer learning, cultural and community recreational activities (Eldredge & Dornbusch, 1992).
- Communities combat alcohol, drugs and violence in and around schools and neighborhoods by providing after-school programs to give children safe havens and positive alternatives (Community Information Exchange, 1992).
- Community members provide mentoring and homework assistance programs to assure tutoring and guidance from knowledgeable, responsible adults (Crespo & Cid, 1991; Cortes, 2000).
- Community organizations enlist community volunteers to serve as tutors or teacher aides, work in the library or help with after-school activities (Crespo & Cid, 1991; Cortes, 2000).

2. Barriers to Parent and Community Involvement

Despite the evidence that parents matter for school and district improvement, there are inadequate supports for parent and community engagement with schools, especially in low income communities. Too often, parents do not feel welcome in their children's schools.

- As of 1997, only 18 percent of high poverty school districts reported initiating any efforts to increase the involvement of parents in their children's schools (U.S. Department of Education, 1997).
- Sixty-six percent of teachers blame their students' academic failings on home and family life (U.S. Department of Education, 2001).
- The level of parents' school involvement is more readily explained by school, teacher and district-level practices than by the socioeconomic characteristics of parents themselves (Berger, 1991; Chavkin & Williams, 1993; Comer, 1988; Epstein, 1995).

3. What the Polls Say

A growing number of educators and community members are expressing the conviction that students' academic achievement depends on strong home-school-community relationships. For example:

- Teachers ranked strengthening parents' roles in children's learning as the issue that should receive the highest priority in public education policy over the next several years (Harris & Associates, 1993).
- Eighty-nine percent of administrators identified the lack of parent involvement as the biggest obstacle to school reform (Finn & Rebarber, 1992).

- More than half of all voters polled in 2000 expressed strong agreement with the statement “School officials and government alone cannot do all that is necessary to improve public schools, unless there is more community involvement and support for public education at the same time” (Public Education Network, 2000).

4. Characteristics of Successful Parent/Family Involvement Programs

Parent and family involvement programs work best when they are comprehensive, well planned and ongoing. Such programs are most effective when:

- Schools and districts make clear through written policies that parent and community involvement in schools is strongly desired and encouraged (White, 1983).
- Schools and districts give adequate program support, including meeting space, equipment, food, transportation and childcare to facilitate parents’ participation (Epstein, 1996; Philipsen, 1996; McCoy, Malick & Leighninger, 2003).
- School staff makes parent involvement a school-wide priority (Becher, 1986; Henderson & Mapp, 2002).
- Staff is given adequate time to coordinate and participate in family involvement activities (Epstein, 1996; Wyman, 2001).
- School policy planning is jointly conducted by school staff, parents and community-based groups (Henderson & Mapp, 2002).
- School staff and parents receive training in effective collaboration. (Fingon, 1990; Henderson & Mapp, 2002).
- Parents are centrally involved in decision-making (Jackson & Cooper, 1989; White, 1983).

5. Best Practices and Policy Recommendations

Schools and districts seldom offer staff any formal training in how to collaborate with parents. When they do, they often too narrowly conceptualize – and thus limit – parent involvement. Teachers have neither the time nor preparation to work closely with parents. Meanwhile, parents are often unaware of and unsupported in finding out what should be happening for their children in the classroom. States, teacher training institutions, schools and districts all have a constructive role to play in linking parents and communities to schools. Effective programs to engage families and communities embrace a philosophy of partnership. The responsibility for children’s educational development should be a collaborative enterprise among parents, school staff and community.

The state role:

- Change teacher certification requirements to include preparation for working with parents and families (Kirst, 1992).
- Mandate and enforce parent participation in school governance and decision-making bodies (Barrett, 1985; Moore, 1998).
- Provide and target resources to community-based organizations, schools and districts to train parents and school staff in effective educational collaboration and partnerships (Henderson & Mapp, 2002; Kirst, 1992).

The university and teacher training institute role:

- Expand the range of courses taught and required on the importance of parent involvement in the educational process and on practical techniques for making it happen (Epstein, 1996; Maeroff, 1993).
- Partner with community-based organizations working to build a strong parent and grassroots constituency for school reform (Bilby, 2002; Desjean-Perrotta, 2003; Streim & Vissa, 2003).

The school and district role:

- Establish and disseminate written policies on parent and community engagement (Maeroff, 1992).
- Provide training to school staff and parents, including general information on the benefits of family and community involvement, techniques for two-way communication between home and school, and concrete ideas on how to involve parents (Maeroff, 1992).
- Include ability to increase parental involvement in their children's education at home and school in evaluation and promotions standards for teachers and administrators (Epstein, 1996).
- Establish a home-school coordinator in every school to visit homes routinely, run weekly information workshops for parents, and coordinate other activities (Dunst, et al, 1991; Dryfoos, 1995; Streim & Vissa, 2003).
- Hold evening and weekend meetings and conferences to facilitate parents' participation in school planning and decision-making activities (Philipsen, 1996; Epstein, 1996; McCarty, 1994).
- Place a telephone in every classroom and provide voicemail for every teacher (Philipsen, 1996; Streim & Vissa, 2003).
- Hold parent-teacher conferences at least twice a year (McCarty, 1994).
- Send folders of student work home on a weekly or monthly basis for parent review and comment (McCarty, 1994).

- Ensure that important written communications to parents are translated into all appropriate languages so that parents are informed about their children's education and academic progress (Kauffman, Perry & Prentiss, 2001; McCarty, 1994).
- Require written pledges or contracts among students, parents and school staff to work together to increase learning (Maeroff, 1992).
- Involve parents and community-based organizations in professional development workshops and planning (Moore, 1998).

The role of community organizations:

- Reinforce parenting skills by providing family and literacy training and referral services (Community Information Exchange, 1992).
- Support and become informed about school governance issues (Moore, 1998).
- Connect with schools and other organizations to coordinate delivery of services and to eliminate duplication of efforts (Community Information Exchange, 1992).
- Encourage schools to become involved in the surrounding community through cosponsorship of the outreach activities of partner organizations (Cortes, 1980).

References

- Armor, D.J. (1976). *Analysis of the school preferred reading program in selected Los Angeles minority schools*. (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED130243).
- Barrett, N. (1985). *Education sourcebook: The state legislators' guide for reform*. (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED253939).
- Becher, R. (1986). Parents and schools. (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED269137).
- Berger, E.H. (1991). Parent involvement: Yesterday and today. *The Elementary School Journal*, 91(3), 209-219.
- Bilby, S.B. (2002). Community-driven school reform: Parents making a difference in education. *Mott Mosaic*, 1(2), 1-10.
- Chavkin, N.F., & Williams, C. (1993). Minority parents in the elementary school: Attitudes and practices. In N.F. Chavkin (Ed.), *Families and schools in a pluralistic society*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.
- Cochran, M., & Henderson, C.R., Jr. (1986). Family matters: Evaluation of the parental empowerment program. A summary of a final report to the National Institute of Education. (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED280577).
- Comer, J. (1988). Educating poor minority children. *Scientific American*, 259(5), 42-48.
- Community Information Exchange (1992). Community development strategies to prevent alcohol and other drug problems. *Strategy Alert*, 37, 1-17.
- Cortes, M. (1980). The needs of elementary and secondary education: Policy issues paper on migrant education. (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. 194490).

- Crespo, H., Cid, N. (1991). Communities count: Community-based sourcebook for promoting mathematics and science education. (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED348436).
- Dare, D.E., & Maddy-Berstein, C. (1997). A call for leadership in providing student services. *Office of Student Services' Brief*, 8(2), 1-6.
- Desjean-Perratta, B. (2003). The middle school achievement project: A grassroots effort improves middle level education. *Middle School Journal*, 34(3), 5-11.
- Dunst, C.J., Johanson, C., Trivette, C.M., & Hamby, D. (1991). Family-centered early intervention policies and practices: Family-centered or not? *Exceptional Children*, 58, 115-126.
- Dryfoos, J.G. (1995). Full service schools and community-based organizations finally get together to address the crisis in disadvantages communities. Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association (San Francisco, CA, April 18-22, 1995). (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED385899).
- Eldredge, S., & Dornbusch, S.M. (1992). Community-based education support programs in the San Francisco Bay Area. Palo Alto, CA: Community Education Support Network. (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED344909).
- Epstein, J.L. (1995). School/family/community partnerships. *Phi Delta Kappan*, 76(9), 701-712.
- Epstein, J.L. (1996). Perspectives and previews on research and policy in school, family, and community partnerships. In A. Bouth & J.F. Dunn (Eds.), *Family-school links: How do they select educational outcomes?* Mahway, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Inc.

- Fingon, J.C. (1990). Parent-school partnerships. (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED326988).
- Finn, C.E., & Rebarber, T., Eds. (1992). *Education reform in the '90s*. New York: MacMillan.
- Gordon, I. (1979). The effects of parent involvement on schooling. In R.S. Brandt (Ed.), *Partners: Parents and schools*. Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.
- Harris and Associates (1993). *The American teacher, 1993: Teachers respond to President Clinton's Education Proposals*. The Metropolitan Life Survey. New York: MetLife. (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED358082).
- Henderson, A.T., & Mapp, K.L. (2002). *A new wave of evidence: The impact of school, family, and community connections on student achievement*.
- Irvine, D.J. (1979). Parent involvement affects children's cognitive growth. New York State Education Department. (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED176893).
- Jackson, B.L., & Cooper, B.S. (1989). Parent choice and empowerment: New roles for parents. *Urban Education, 24*, 263-286.
- Kauffman, E., Perry, A., & Prentiss, D. (2001). Reasons for and solutions to lack of parental involvement of parents of second language learners. (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED458956).
- Kirst, M.W. (1992). The state role in school restructuring. In C.S. Finn & T. Rebarber (Eds.), *Education reform in the 90s*. New York: MacMillan.
- Lareau, A. (1997). Social class differences in family-school relationships: The importance of cultural capital. *Sociology of Education, 60*(2), 73-85. (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. EJ353123).

- Leler, H. (1987). Parent education and involvement in relation to the schools and to parents of school-aged children. In R. Haskins & D. Adams (Eds.), *Parent education and public policy*. Norwood, NJ: Ablex Publishing Co.
- Maeroff, G.I. (1992) Reform comes home: Policies to encourage parental involvement in children's education. In C.S. Finn & T. Rebarber (Eds.), *Education reform in the 90s*. New York: MacMillan.
- Maeroff, G.I. (1993). Team building for school change: Equipping teachers for new roles. (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED360707).
- McCarty, H. (1994). Ten keys to successful parent involvement and parent conferencing. (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED372866).
- McCoy, M.L., Malick, A.L., & Leighninger, M. (2003). An end to the blame game. *Principal Leadership*, 4(4).
- McDill, E.L. (1969). Educational climates of high schools: Their effects and sources. *American Journal of Sociology*, 74(6), 567-586.
- Moore, D.R. (1998). *What makes these schools stand out: Chicago elementary schools with a seven-year trend of improved reading achievement*. Chicago, IL: Designs for Change. <http://www.designsforchange.org/pdfs/SOScomplete.pdf>
- Philipsen, M. (1996). Parental involvement in school: In search for socially situated understanding. Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association (New York, NY, April 8-12, 1996). (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED395391).
- Public Education Network (2000). All for all: Strengthening community involvement for all students. (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. 458332).

- Snow, C.E., Barnes, W.S., Chandler, J., Goodman, I.F., & Hemphill, L. (1991). *Unfulfilled expectations: Home and school influences on literacy*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press. (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED356303).
- Stevenson, D.L., & Baker, D.P., (1987). The family-school relation and the child's school performance. *Child Development*, 58(5), 1348-1357.
- Streim, N.W., & Vissa, J.M. (2003). Do universities have a role in managing public schools: Lessons from the Penn partnership schools. *Perspectives on urban education*. Philadelphia: Penn Graduate School of Education.
- U.S. Department of Education (1997). Overcoming barriers to family involvement in Title I schools. Report to Congress. (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED407483).
- U.S. Department of Education (2001). National Center for Education Statistics. Efforts by public K-8 schools to involve parents in children's education: NCES 2001-676, by Xianglei Chen. Public Officer: Kathryn Chandler. Washington, DC.
- Wagenaar, T.C. (1977). School achievement level vis-à-vis community involvement and support: An empirical assessment. Presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Sociological Association: Chicago, IL, September 5, 1977. (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED146111).
- White, J.R., (1983). Parent participation in decision-making as perceived by parents, teachers, principals, and board members: A summary report. (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED249569).
- Wyman, W. (2001). Teaching Quality. *Progress of Educational Reform, 1999-2001*, 2(4).