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Partnering with Families and Communities

A well-organized program of family and community partnerships yields many benefits for schools and their students.

Joyce L. Epstein and Karen Clark Salinas



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What is the difference between a professional learning community and a school learning community? A *professional learning community* emphasizes the teamwork of principals, teachers, and staff to identify school goals, improve curriculum and instruction, reduce teachers' isolation, assess student progress, and increase the effectiveness of school programs. Professional teamwork is important and can greatly improve teaching, instruction, and professional relationships in a school, but it falls short of producing a true community of learners. In contrast, a *school learning community* includes educators, students, parents, and community partners who work together to improve the school and enhance students' learning opportunities.

One component of a school learning community is an organized program of school, family, and community partnerships with activities linked to school goals. Research and fieldwork show that such programs improve schools, strengthen families, invigorate community support, and increase student achievement and success (Epstein, 2001; Henderson & Mapp, 2002; Sheldon, 2003).

Pipe Dream or Possibility?

Is it a pipe dream to think that every school can become a true learning community, or is it really possible? During the past eight years, more than 1,000 schools, districts, and state departments of education in the National Network of Partnership Schools at Johns Hopkins University have worked with researchers to develop and implement programs of school, family, and community partnerships. Their efforts have produced not only many research publications but also research-based materials that elementary, middle, and high schools can use to customize and continually improve their programs of family and community involvement (Epstein et al., 2002).

Research-Based Approaches

A well-organized partnership program starts with an Action Team for Partnerships. Made up of

teachers, administrators, parents, and community partners, the Action Team is linked to the school council or school improvement team. With a clear focus on promoting student success, the team writes annual plans for family and community involvement, implements and evaluates activities, and integrates the activities conducted by other groups and individual teachers into a comprehensive partnership program for the school.

Annual action plans use a research-based framework of six types of involvement—parenting, communicating, volunteering, learning at home, decision making, and collaborating with the community—to focus partnerships on school improvement goals (see fig. 1, p. 15). By implementing activities for all six types of involvement, schools can help parents become involved at school and at home in various ways that meet student needs and family schedules. Input from participants helps schools address challenges and improve plans, activities, and outreach so that all families can be productive partners in their children's school success.

Figure 1. Six Types of Involvement

- *Parenting.* Assist families with parenting skills, family support, understanding child and adolescent development, and setting home conditions to support learning at each age and grade level. Assist schools in understanding families' backgrounds, cultures, and goals for children.
- *Communicating.* Communicate with families about school programs and student progress. Create two-way communication channels between school and home.
- *Volunteering.* Improve recruitment, training, activities, and schedules to involve families as volunteers and as audiences at the school or in other locations. Enable educators to work with volunteers who support students and the school.
- *Learning at Home.* Involve families with their children in academic learning at home, including homework, goal setting, and other curriculum-related activities. Encourage teachers to design homework that enables students to share and discuss interesting tasks.
- *Decision Making.* Include families as participants in school decisions, governance, and advocacy activities through school councils or improvement teams, committees, and parent organizations.
- *Collaborating with the Community.* Coordinate resources and services for families, students, and the school with community groups, including businesses, agencies, cultural and civic organizations, and colleges or universities. Enable all to contribute service to the community.

Source: Epstein et al., 2002.

Stories from the Field

To understand how research on partnerships is applied in practice and to learn from educators and families about challenges that must be addressed to involve all families, each year the National Network of Partnership Schools collects what are called *promising partnership practices* (Salinas & Jansorn, 2003). The following examples illustrate how schools in urban, suburban, and rural locations are working to create effective programs of family and community involvement to strengthen their learning communities.

Welcoming All Families

A school learning community welcomes *all* families. Many schools serve a diverse range of students, including new immigrants and refugees. The parents of such students, like all parents, want their children to succeed in school. These children, like all students, do better when their parents and teachers are partners. In a welcoming school, educators appreciate differences and involve all families in many ways throughout the school year.

Like many schools in the National Network of Partnership Schools, Madison Junior High in Naperville, Illinois, fosters a welcoming environment by implementing activities for all six types of family involvement. Last year, the school held evening discussions about adolescence to help parents share effective parenting strategies and network with one another on important topics; published newsletters; held "Thursday Things," a weekly activity for sending information home; created a database of volunteers; hosted honor roll breakfasts; conducted family literacy nights; built connections with business partners; and celebrated Dad's Day. All activities were linked to goals for students in the school improvement plan and help foster an active learning community.

Roosevelt Elementary School in St. Paul, Minnesota, organized the Second Cup of Coffee program—a monthly morning activity during which parents have the opportunity to meet with teachers, administrators, and other parents and discuss such school activities as testing, homework, and reading programs. Translators encouraged parents with diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds to attend these and other school activities.

Early Childhood Center #17 in Buffalo, New York, conducted its Diversity Celebration program to help students, teachers, and families learn about and appreciate more than eight cultural groups represented in their learning community. Families and community volunteers contributed cultural items and worked with students on costumes, skits, poems, songs, and dances. The activities helped students develop language skills and other talents and involved diverse families in their children's learning.

Focusing on Achievement

A school learning community puts a laserlike focus on student learning and success. Schools in the National Network of Partnership Schools have implemented many family and community

involvement activities to support and extend students' reading, writing, math, and goal-setting skills. The home, school, and community connections make school subjects more meaningful for students.

Reading. Many schools engage parents and community partners by offering workshop sessions on reading, by organizing reading volunteers, and by helping parents strengthen students' reading skills and encourage reading for pleasure at home (Baker & Moss, 2001; Sheldon & Epstein, in press-a). For example, Clara E. Westropp School in Cleveland, Ohio, conducted monthly family reading nights. The school librarian identified age-appropriate books for students from kindergarten through grade 4. Parents came to school with their children, selected books from the library, asked teachers questions about reading, and learned strategies to increase children's reading at home.

All students in grades 1–3 participated in the Book Check program at Ladysmith Elementary School in Ladysmith, Wisconsin. Parents, teachers, retired teachers, and high school students performing community service volunteered to listen to children retell the stories they had read and to discuss plots, settings, and characters. The students took tests on the books they had read and then moved on to new reading. The program expanded from a pilot project to a whole-school activity, creating an active reading community.

Many schools in the National Network of Partnership Schools conduct reading-partner programs once a week, twice a month, or on other schedules with a variety of volunteers, including parents, senior citizens, and community groups. Others hold special reading events. For example, Dr. Lydia T. Wright School in Buffalo, New York, ran a reading marathon for 26 days to focus the entire community on reading. This event involved parents, grandparents, and others in the community—for example, police officers, firefighters, local authors of books for children, the mayor, judges, local celebrities, and older students—in reading activities.

The Lea Conmigo (Read with Me) program, conducted by Families in Schools in Los Angeles, California, provided books to more than 23,000 students and families in an effort to improve the early literacy skills of preschool and kindergarten children. Teachers introduced the program to parents, many of whom did not speak English. Parents received English and Spanish books to take home and learned ways to encourage their children's reading. Data show that students improved their reading skills and parents increased the time they read with their children.

Writing. Partnerships for writing take many forms, including workshops in the writing process, activities that engage parents in writing, presentations by local authors, and celebrations of student writing before family and community audiences. At Highlands Elementary School in Naperville, Illinois, a writing workshop series helped more than 120 parents learn about the school's writing process, state writing tests, and ways to support student writing at home. All sessions were videotaped for parents who could not attend. Arminta Street Elementary School in North Hollywood, California, turned a classroom into the Arminta Café That Celebrates Literacy, serving coffee, tea, and cookies to parents who listened to students read their writing aloud. Other schools have students share their stories, poems, journals, and artwork with their

parents. At Discovery School #98 in Buffalo, New York, students discussed their portfolios with family members or neighbors who came to class. Visitors were given a list of questions to ask to keep the discussion moving.

Many schools take other innovative approaches. Teachers from Loreto Elementary School in Los Angeles attended a district workshop on Parents as Authors and then worked with their students' parents on Thursday mornings for three months. Many new immigrant parents created books and videos about their lives and experiences, wrote poems about their children, and then presented their work to their children. The activity expanded when 5th grade teachers met with their students' families to create family books as gifts for the 5th grade graduates. In this way, the school's learning community grew to include parent-authors who had had little or no prior schooling in the United States.

Math. Family involvement in math may encompass events for parents and students, community connections, information sessions for parents on math curriculum and assessments, and homework support (Sheldon & Epstein, in press-b). In Cuyahoga Falls, Ohio, more than 600 people wanted to attend Woodridge Primary School's Math Night program, making it necessary for the school to conduct the program twice. For Math Night, the school invited families to learn about the new Ohio state math standards. The Action Team for Partnerships, in cooperation with parents, teachers, and community partners, provided dinner, conducted teacher-led math sessions on ways to help students with math at home, distributed take-home bags of math materials and information on state standards, handed out coupons from local businesses, and even held a math-related raffle.

Math also became a real-world activity at Kennedy Junior High in Lisle, Illinois. In an estimation project called Beat Pete, a math class followed Pete, a local moving man, to estimate the weight and cost of a moving job. The program provided students with bus transportation, printed materials to prepare for the estimation task, and prizes for best estimates.

Thurmont Middle School in Thurmont, Maryland, conducted a highly focused workshop series for parents and students to help students prepare for the state's Functional Math Test. At monthly meetings, parents and students worked together under teachers' guidance and received math homework materials. Students who failed a practice math test were invited with their parents to additional sessions. More than 80 percent of the 6th graders passed the required math test, exceeding the school's goal by more than 10 percent and surpassing the percentage of passing 7th graders, who had not taken the workshops. The teachers enjoyed working with one another as well as with parents and students to reach an important school goal as they strengthened their math learning community.

Because most parents cannot frequently come to the school building to see what their children are learning, new designs for homework hold promise for engaging all parents in weekly discussions with their children about schoolwork. For example, an interactive homework process from the National Network of Partnership Schools called Teachers Involve Parents in Schoolwork (TIPS) helps elementary and middle school teachers design and assign homework that enables all students to share what they are learning with a family member (Epstein, Salinas, & Van Voorhis, 2001; Van Voorhis & Epstein, 2002). Homework is part of a full

program of school, family, and community partnerships and extends the learning community to include student learning outside school (Epstein, 2001; Van Voorhis, 2003).

Planning for college and work. In school learning communities, educators, parents, and community partners help students focus on their plans for college and careers and on the education requirements they must fulfill to meet their goals. For example, at Glenmary School in Peace River, Alberta, Canada, high school students, parents, and faculty were involved in Career Portfolio Night. Eleventh graders researched a career of interest, interviewed a professional in their selected field, and created a personal career path and portfolio about that career. By involving families in this class assignment, the students' career portfolio displays, presentations, and evaluations became a shared learning experience and created new contacts for students with many potential future employers. This age-appropriate activity reflects research findings that demonstrate the importance of parent-student discussions throughout high school about education and future plans.

The Mother-Daughter College Preparation Program was started in District B in Los Angeles to help 5th grade Latinas and their mothers think about postsecondary education. In 2003, more than 160 mothers and daughters made college visits to California State University at Northridge. The program serves 17 schools and approximately 425 mother-daughter teams, and participation continues to grow. Due to its popularity, Families in Schools and District F expanded the Mother-Daughter College Preparation Program to form an extension known as Going On To (GOT) College. The GOT College program guides boys, girls, and family members to visit local colleges and to plan their middle and high school programs to enable students to qualify for college. By introducing postsecondary pathways early in students' education careers, families and students can plan more effectively for their futures—both educationally and financially.

Collaborating with the Community

A school learning community works with many partners to increase students' learning opportunities and experiences. Activities to enrich students' skills and talents may be conducted during lunch, after school, and at other times by school, family, and community partners (Sanders, 2001; Sanders & Harvey, 2002).

Teachers in the middle grades at Good Shepherd School in Peace River, Alberta, asked community instructors in tai chi, tae kwon do, and hip-hop dance to volunteer their time to conduct fitness classes for students during the lunch hour. This program, known as Try It at Lunch, enrolled many students, increasing interest in the community programs.

FamiliesFORWARD, working in Cincinnati, Ohio, conducted the Gifts We Share program to help students and families in high-poverty schools give of themselves, meet their neighbors, and improve students' writing and reading skills. Students wrote letters to invite senior citizens to become pen pals and to interact in other ways. Parents helped students coordinate several events, including a dinner to honor the seniors. The seniors, too, shared their talents and participated as guest readers, oral historians, and volunteers at school. The project extended the demographics of the learning community by including senior citizen neighbors.

Studies indicate that enriched learning activities help students do better in school, but not all families have extra resources for such activities. At East Taunton Elementary School in Taunton, Massachusetts, business partners provided part of the costs of buses and entrance fees for students and families to visit museums and attend cultural programs. Many community partners are more willing to help when they know that their investments contribute to student learning and success in school.

Allen and Lathrop Elementary Schools in Canton, Ohio, organized the Mercy Pals program to support two-way community service. Local medical center volunteers provided students and families with health care information and medical testing, gave presentations on careers and hobbies, led science activities, and supplied nutritious treats to sustain students during achievement testing. In return, students conducted community service activities for patients and hospital staff, created art displays, and performed at hospital celebrations.

Strengthening School Learning Communities

Schools have a vested interest in becoming true learning communities. They are now accountable for *all* students' learning. The No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) requires schools, districts, and states to develop academic programs that will increase students' proficiency in reading, math, and science. To learn at high levels, all students need the guidance and support of their teachers, families, and others in the community.

NCLB also requires schools, districts, and states to develop programs to communicate with all families about their children's education and to involve them in ways that help boost student achievement and success. The federal legislation, related state and district policies, school goals, family and student expectations, and useful research on partnerships are converging to encourage all schools to establish active and effective learning communities.

Most schools conduct at least a few activities to involve families in their children's education, but most do not have well-organized, goal-linked, and sustainable partnership programs. The schools featured here differ from most schools in two important ways. Organizationally, educators, parents, and other partners are working together to systematically strengthen and maintain their family and community involvement programs over time. Interpersonally, these partners recognize that they all have roles to play in helping students succeed in school—and that, together with students, they *are* the school's learning community.

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The National Network of Partnership Schools at Johns Hopkins University provides professional development

training, tools, and materials on school, family, and community partnerships. The Web site (www.partnershipschools.org) features research briefs; annual collections of promising practices from schools, districts, and states; descriptions of award-winning partnership programs; and information on how to join the network.

Joyce L. Epstein (jepstein@csos.jhu.edu) is Director and **Karen Clark Salinas** (ksalinas@csos.jhu.edu) is Communications Director, Center on School, Family, and Community Partnerships and the National Network of Partnership Schools at Johns Hopkins University, 3003 N. Charles St., Ste. 200, Baltimore, MD 20218; (410) 516-8800.

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