

Building on Family Strengths:

The “Nondeficit” Involvement Model for Teaming Home and School

Schools can help children learn by sending home “recipes” for parents.

True or False?

Parent involvement with school is successful only when its goal is increased student motivation and achievement. —T —F

The overwhelming majority of parents, regardless of their socioeconomic and educational backgrounds, possess the basic strengths and abilities to help their children achieve. —T —F

The authors of this article believe these statements to be true. Our belief is based on research of the past decade and on our own experiences in working with schools and families nationally.

The Nondeficit Approach

If we make these beliefs the basis for policy and action, we educators can save ourselves unnecessary work and much grief. We can capitalize on the family—any family—as the critically important resource it is to ensure that children achieve. The nondeficit model is built on these assumptions:

- Schools, no matter how understaffed or equipped, have the capabilities of reaching out and effecting parent involvement—using easy, inexpensive materials.

- Schools should start with what the family has instead of worrying about what it doesn't have.

- Home environments, no matter how poor, are a citadel of care and concern for children. Family concern can be readily translated into practical support for children and for schools.

The nondeficit model builds on the existing strengths and creativity of homes and schools without waiting for what probably won't come—organizational change or massive government funding.

What We've Always Known

Actually, professional educators have always known intuitively what research has revealed in the last few years—that parents are the most important teachers of their children.

Albert Shanker, president of the American Federation of Teachers, is surely an advocate for professional educators. Yet, as a parent, he obviously knows that he, rather than the school, is ultimately responsible for his children's education. When he discovered that his children didn't know the multiplication tables, he sat right down with them, fixed homemade flash cards, and said "no TV" until they learned.¹

As parents ourselves, we teachers have always worked with our own children, not expecting the school—even the best schools—to do the job alone.

The Current Scene

Many parents are better educated than those of previous decades. It's no secret that parents are asking questions, making demands, and showing concern. These are good signs. Parents are seeking involvement in the education of their children. They may not come to the traditional kinds of meetings, but parents are interested in ways to help their own children—ways that are easy, fast, and linked to their children's school achievement.²

Traditional Parent Involvement Models

Over the years several school-home activity models have been identified. They include volunteerism, parent-school communication, policy making, and parent education and training.³

Volunteerism offers extra personpower in the classroom. Volunteerism at its best can provide active roles for parents, but volunteers help students in general, not necessarily their own children.

Parent-school communication usually comes

in the form of report cards, conferences, and newsletters to keep parents informed. Most of this communication is initiated by the school, and parents play relatively passive roles.

Policy making usually takes the form of Parent Advisory Committees. Relatively few parents can, or wish to, participate in such committees.

Parent education and training has involved teaching parents how to improve their family life and/or how to work with their children. Of all the models identified, this one offers the most substantive research to date.

What Research Tells Us

In study after study from Bloom, Coleman, and Jencks, to the lesser known but significant findings of the early childhood intervention projects, the home and the community have been identified as vital influences intimately linked with student success.⁴

Synthesizing the work in compensatory education and involvement of parents in training programs were two studies emanating from Stanford. *Parent Involvement in Compensatory Education Programs* assessed the major models of parent involvement that evolved in the preceding decade.⁵ The study considered evidence supporting the hypothesis that parent involvement (in one or more roles) leads to improved child achievement. In general, that evidence supported the participation of parents as tutors of their children.

¹ Maya Pines. "You Can Help Your Children Learn." *The Reader's Digest*, January 1979, p. 100.

² George Gallup. "Annual Gallup Poll of the Public Attitudes Toward the Public Schools." *Phi Delta Kappan* 60(3): November 1978.

³ James Filipczak et al. *Parental Involvement in the Schools: Towards What End?* Silver Spring, Maryland: Institute for Behavioral Research, April 1977.

⁴ Benjamin Bloom. *Stability and Change in Human Characteristics*. New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1964; James S. Coleman et al. *Equality of Educational Opportunity*. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1966; Christopher Jencks et al. *Inequality: A Reassessment of the Effect of Family and Schooling in America*. New York: Basic Books, 1972.

⁵ Stanford Research Institute. *Parent Involvement in Compensatory Education Programs*. Washington, D.C.: Office of Planning, Budgeting, and Evaluation, U.S. Office of Education, 1973.

The more recent Stanford study was *Parents as Teachers of Young Children*. "As a group," say the authors, "the programs involving parents as teachers consistently produced significant immediate gains in children's IQ scores, and seemed to alter in a positive direction the teaching behavior of parents."⁶

Thanks to the mounting research of the last decade a growing number of us are recognizing that the home is the determining academic educational institution in the lives of children.

Evidence has accumulated to confirm that the school is not able to do the complete educational job. Schools are not super-institutions, never were, and never can be. Schools are good, but they are limited in their overall impact.

What's New?

How has all of this evidence changed the work of most schools in the way they relate to the family and the home? The answer—not very much. The carnivals, music, and book fairs continue, and so do the bake sales. "Back-to-school night" goes on in its traditional form, usually teachers giving lectures to parents.

These programs take effort and a great deal of teacher time. They are designed with the best intentions, but most of them bear no relation to what teachers and parents care about most: building student motivation and achievement.

Much has been written about school-parent relations because of its intriguing and often frustrating complexity. Roland Barth says, "One might expect that sharing a daily preoccupation with the same children would form a common bond, bringing principal, teacher, and parents together. Unfortunately, this bond seldom develops naturally or spontaneously. We school people need help in finding ways to work cooperatively with parents; and parents badly need assistance in translating their basic caring into actions that will improve the situation for their children, the school, and themselves."⁷

Translating the Research into Action

Practical, mutually-reinforcing home-school efforts keyed to student achievement are needed now. These efforts can be successful if they:

- Provide for direct service and an individualized approach within the family setting;
- Mesh with parents' aspirations for their own children;
- Assume that parents care and have the capacity to do what's right for their children, regardless of their economic and educational backgrounds;
- Make sure that parents know how important they are in determining their child's school success.

One of the strategies we at the Home and School Institute have developed is called "Home Learning Recipes." The "recipes" are specific, practical, no-cost activities for learning at home. Their goal is to build family interaction and children's academic achievement without duplicating the school.

Data thus far from projects using the recipes indicates that they are effective. The model is keyed to what any family can do. All families and teachers are assumed to care and to be able to do a good job. Among the programs from which data can be reported are these:

- *The HSI Home Learning Study and its Relationship to Children's First Grade Achievement, 1974-75*.—Four first-grade classes, from both inner city and suburban schools, achieved significantly higher scores in reading than the classes in a control group. Eight times, suggestions for ways the family could reinforce and supplement reading and math were sent home from school pinned to the child. Not typical school work, the activities featured use of the grocery store, the gas station, and the home.⁸

- *Project HELP: (Home Educational Learning Program)*, Benton Harbor Schools, Michigan,

⁶ Barbara Goodson and Robert Hess. *Parents as Teachers of Young Children: An Evaluative Review of Some Contemporary Concepts and Programs*. Palo Alto: Stanford University, 1975.

⁷ Roland Barth. "Parents as Helpers, Critics and Adversaries." *National Elementary Principal* 58(1): 52; October 1978.

⁸ Dorothy Rich. "The Relationship of the Home Learning Lab Technique to First Grade Student Achievement." Dissertation, Catholic University of America, 1976. See also: *A Family Affair: Education*. Washington, D.C.: The Home and School Institute, 1977.

1976-77.—In Benton Harbor, the HSI "recipes" model was used in a citywide Title I program for first graders with IQ's of 90 or below. The "recipes" were developed jointly by parents and teachers. Gains per pupil were achieved for \$4.83 per student, compared with "pull-out" or special class instructional costs of \$563 per student per year.⁹

• *AHEAD (Accelerating Home Education and Development)*, Los Angeles, with the South-

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ern Christian Leadership Conference/West, 1978-79.—The HSI curriculum method is being used to train CETA workers to help families, most of whom are black or Hispanic, teach their children at home. The bilingual (English/Spanish) project reached nine low-achieving schools in the last half of the school year 1977-78. The children affected were in grades two and three. Results compiled in 1978 after only five months of the program indicated that students in seven of the nine participating schools tested higher in reading.¹⁰ Home-school cooperation may not be the only reason for the increase, but Phil Linscomb, Assistant Superintendent, Instruction, says, "We're pleased with the program and want to see it expanded."¹¹

What's been considered remarkable by many observers of these programs is that parents voluntarily and delightedly do these activities with their children. We don't consider it remarkable. The activities are not threatening or demanding. They're easy to read, short, practical, and—very important—they do not duplicate school work, although they help develop basic skills. They are enjoyable, and they provide a way to help families express the value they place on education.

Marnesba Tackett, executive director of the AHEAD project, says, "We are convinced that parents must be involved at home in the education of their children if the children are to realize

their highest potential in school. We are not trying to replace the schools . . . we're attempting to get the parents to use the skills, the tools they have in the home to increase the children's motivation, inquisitiveness, and interest."¹²

In the newest HSI program, "*Families Learning Together*," parents are told: "Don't worry about doing anything wrong in this home teaching. You can't do it wrong and neither can your child!"¹³ "*Families Learning Together*" is a pilot effort, funded by The Charles Stewart Mott Foundation, to teach parents about the subject content of the activities while they in turn are teaching their children reading and mathematics. The focus is on regular school years, kindergarten to grade six. Subjects into which the academics are woven include health and safety, citizenship, family relations, consumer and job skills.

The thrust of all HSI programs and materials is the continuing search to help educators work effectively with families without spending too much time and money, but with tangible results.

⁹ Gladys E. Burks. "An Analysis of the Cost-Effectiveness of Title I Pull-Out Instruction in the Benton Harbor Area Schools." Benton Harbor, Michigan Schools, May 1978.

¹⁰ Bernard Plaskett. *AHEAD REPORT*. Los Angeles: Southern Christian Leadership Conference/West, September 1978.

¹¹ Telephone conversation with Ron Brandt, February 2, 1979.

¹² Lynn Simross. "A Home Base for the Educating Process." *Los Angeles Times*, December 26, 1978.

¹³ The Home and School Institute. "*Families Learning Together*." Washington, D.C., 1978-79.



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