Synthesis of Recent Research on Parent Participation in Children’s Education

Among educators, there is considerable interest in parent involvement in education. In an NEA poll (1981), over 90 percent of teachers in all parts of the country and at all grade levels stated that more home-school interaction would be desirable. The nationwide Gallup polls of public attitudes toward education reflect a similar interest, as well as approval of some specific forms of parent participation. When asked what more the public schools should be doing, a frequent suggestion was for closer teacher-parent relationships, including more conferences and information on what parents can do at home to help children in school. Eighty percent of parents with school-age children agreed with the idea of parents attending school one evening a month to learn how to improve children’s behavior and interest in school work (Gallup, 1978).

Reviewing survey findings over a ten-year period, Gallup (1978) concluded: “A joint and coordinated effort by parents and teachers is essential to dealing more successfully with problems of discipline, motivation, and the development of good work habits at home and in school...” For little added expertise (which the public is willing to pay) the public schools can, by working with parents, meet educational standards impossible to reach without such cooperation.

The idea of parents assisting their children’s education by working with schools has been the subject of much debate. On the one hand is the interest of educators and parents and evidence of the idea’s usefulness, and on the other hand are serious barriers to its implementation. Nevertheless, individual teachers, schools, and school systems have developed programs and practices to involve parents in their children’s schooling. I would like to describe examples of some recent studies, including programs in the upper grades, and draw conclusions that may help others contemplating similar activities.

Some Effects of Parent Participation on Achievement

At the preschool level, there is much support for parent involvement. Bronfenbrenner (1974), who has reviewed a variety of early intervention programs, concluded that the active involvement of the family is critical to program success. It reinforces and helps sustain the effects of school programs.

At the elementary level, a number of studies also point to benefits of parent involvement (Phi Delta Kappa, 1980). In a recent review of related studies, Henderson (1981) stated: “Taken together, what is most interesting about the research is that it all points in the same direction. The form of parent involvement does not seem to be critical, so long as it is reasonably well-planned, comprehensive, and long-lasting.”

However, some studies of parents’ home participation to aid school learning suggest that effects are not universally positive. In a study of Michigan elementary schools, Brookover and his associates (1979) found greater parental involvement in white than in black schools, but only in black schools was high involvement associated with greater achievement.

A recent large study of parent involvement in ESEA Title I, the ESEA Title VII Bilingual Program, Follow Through, and the Emergency School Aid Act presents a cautious picture of parent participation activities. After advisory groups the next most common form of involvement was communication, mostly from the project to the home. While most projects provided some kind of parent education, usually on a one-time basis, few helped parents teach their own children at home or had arranged face-to-face discussions between parents and staff members (Burns, 1982). Thus, even in large federally funded programs there was little sustained effort to communicate with parents and help them assist in the instructional process.

These studies suggest that there is much still to be learned about the kinds of families and schools, and the kinds of home-school and parent-child relationships, that promote student achievement. Nevertheless, there is reason for optimism. As Benson (1980) observed, “No group of parents, hence, should regard their efforts toward their children as foreordained to failure.”

How Parents Participate

Typically, parent participation consists of at least two distinctive stages and under the best conditions implies an equality between parents and school personnel. First are the parent-school contacts in which parents learn about their children’s school performance and ways they can assist. These contacts also help teachers learn of student capabilities and interests and about parents’ ability to help their children. Second are the home learning activities themselves in which children acquire information and skills useful for the classroom.

Parent-school contacts may take the form of notes, conferences, home visits,
and joint participation in workshops and classes. Children become home learners through at least four kinds of educational processes: home instruction, enrichment activities, contracts to supervise homework or provide incentives for good work, and modeling of educational pursuits by family members.

Various kinds of parent involvement were evaluated by elementary teachers in a six-state regional survey (Williams, 1981). Generally, teachers were not enthusiastic about parent participation in curriculum development, instruction, or school governance. They did support other forms of parent involvement, such as assisting with homework or tutoring children, but felt that teachers should give parents ideas about how to help. Teachers noted that their own schools did not usually provide opportunities for parents and teachers to work together on such activities.

A companion survey of elementary principals in the same six states produced similar results (Williams, 1981). Principals valued parent participation in children's home learning for several reasons: it helps schools, reinforces school learning, and is within parents' capabilities. But the principals also felt that parents lack adequate training to prepare them for an active role in children's home learning.

Barriers to Home-School Collaboration

A variety of conditions may limit the extent of home-school communication and parent cooperation with schools. For example, many parents face competing demands of work and family life, come from different cultural backgrounds, and feel distrust and anxiety when dealing with school staff. For their part, many teachers also face competing demands at school and at home, lack training for dealing with parents, and may have difficulty relating to culturally different families.

Lightfoot (1978) goes a step farther and suggests that home-school relations are inherently in conflict. She believes that different priorities and perceptions of families and schools, such as concern for one's own child versus responsibility for group progress, will inevitably create conflict over the means of attaining common goals. She sees collaboration largely as a one-way process with schools seldom accommodating in a significant way to family needs.

In their exploratory study of home-school collaboration in two inner-city junior high schools, Tangri and Leitch (1982) identified a number of barriers. Because this study deals with families of older students, about whom less is known regarding home-school relation-

### Highlights from Research on Tutoring

Effective parent involvement programs offer various forms of training and opportunities for parents to work with schools and teachers. Parent participation usually begins with contacts (notes, phone calls, visits) in which teachers report on student progress and parents indicate whether they are willing and able to assist. The second stage of parent participation involves home learning activities.

Among the methods parents use to help students learn are:
- Reading activities in which parents listen, correct, and praise their children's reading
- Discussions (based on teacher-suggested guidelines) about television programs that parents and children watch together
- Family games that relate to school work
- Instructional techniques designed for parents to help with homework.

Both to initiate and maintain contact with parents, school districts offer such services as telephone hotlines, which parents can call for information about school activities and homework assignments; workshops where parents can learn to make simple instructional aids or develop tutoring skills; parent-teacher conferences where instructional ideas are explored; and individually prescribed home learning activities for students in areas where they are academically weak.

Although public opinion polls indicate that both teachers and parents favor more parent involvement, many programs face obstacles, the most common including:
- Parents' and teachers' conflicting family commitments and time constraints
- Parents' and schools' differing perceptions of learning priorities
- Teachers' low expectations of parents' efforts
- Teachers' inability to handle their students' family problems
- Parents' inability to help students with homework they don't understand
- A history of negative communications between the home and school.

Certain prevailing beliefs about parent participation do not stand up to research findings. It appears, for instance, that parents' level of education has no connection with their ability to use at-home instructional techniques or with their willingness to help; that working mothers are just as able to help their children as nonemployed mothers; and that teachers do not necessarily work better with highly educated parents.
ships, it is of special interest. Teachers reported competing home responsibilities, fears for their own safety at evening events, the perception that parents do not transmit educational values, feeling overwhelmed by the problems of their students and families, and low expectations regarding parents’ follow-up efforts. Parents also reported a number of barriers including family health problems, work schedules, having small children, receiving only “bad news” from school, fears for their safety, late notice of meetings, and not understanding their children’s homework.

Both parents and teachers recognized that most communication between them was negative—teacher messages about poor student performance and parent complaints regarding events in school. Both groups also reported that the school work was beyond the comprehension of some parents, despite the desire of many to understand. Both parents and teachers suggested workshops for parents interested in becoming familiar with course assignments (Tangri and Leitch, 1982).

Despite such barriers, some programs and practices are adapting to various grade levels and social backgrounds of students.

Some Promising School Programs

Some schools and school systems have developed programs aimed at helping poorly educated and low-income parents contribute to their children’s schooling. The Parents Plus program in Chicago brings such parents into the school one day a week to learn how they can help at home with current school work and to expand their homemaking and community-related skills. On a less ambitious scale, many schools encourage “make it, take it” sessions where parents can make inexpensive educational aids and learn how to use them at home. Other schools give parents calendars with simple daily home learning activity suggestions or booklets with more general tips.

The Home and School Institute has developed “home learning recipes” that build family interaction and academic progress without duplicating school activities. Easy to follow and aimed at improving basic skills, they have been adopted by various school systems for use in elementary school projects (Rich and others, 1979). The Houston Fail-safe program gives parents computer-generated individualized suggestions for improving their children’s performance in deficient areas. Large numbers of parents attend the well-publicized conferences with teachers where these suggestions are discussed. The Philadelphia School District pioneered the use of telephone hotlines to help students with homework problems and to inform parents of school events and provide them with educational advice.

Most of these programs were identified in a recent survey of home-school partnership programs in the upper elementary and secondary schools in the 24 largest American cities (Collins and others, 1982). Twenty-eight programs were found that involved parents in improving the school performance and social development of their children. Half were targeted on low-income families, but many were also citywide programs capable of reaching educationally disadvantaged students from all walks of life.

To involve parents, the programs used individual conferences, workshops or classes, and home visits or telephone calls to parents. Most saw achievement in reading and math as a major goal, but half or more were also concerned with attendance or social development. Eighteen of the 28 programs expected parents to tutor their children at home; 21 sought to use parents in broader socializing roles; and 19 helped parents plan their children’s home and community educational experiences. In many places parents and educators have overcome the distance, fears, and other barriers that have separated them in the past.

These programs reported some very encouraging results: reduced absenteeism, higher achievement scores, improved student behavior, and restored confidence and participation among parents. Eighteen saw greater parent support and communication with the schools, and 11 reported greater parent participation in their children’s learning and development. Whether these gains and changes in behavior can be attributed directly to stronger home-school relationships is difficult to assess, but it would be useful to explore this possibility further.

Teacher Practices

Individual teachers have also developed a wide range of practices for participating parents. Becker and Epstein (1982) have identified 14 techniques for involving parents in teaching activities at home and examined their use in a statewide survey of 3,700 elementary school teachers. The techniques were subsequently clustered into five approaches:

- Activities emphasizing reading, such as asking parents to read to their children or listen to them read
- Learning through discussion, such as asking parents to watch a special television program with their children and discuss it afterward
- Informal learning activities at home, such as sending home ideas for family games or activities related to school work
- Contracting between teachers and parents, such as formal agreements for parents to supervise and assist children with homework
- Developing teaching and evaluation skills in parents, such as explaining techniques for teaching or making learning materials.

The most popular approach involved parents in reading instruction. Its use declined from first to fifth grade, as did use of informal learning activities and development of teaching skills. But the use of contracts, television-stimulated family discussions, parent evaluation forms, and assignments to ask parents questions were used as often with older students as with younger children.

Teachers reported the most contact with parents of children who had learning or discipline problems or parents who were already assisting in the school. Teachers with more black students used more of the five parent involvement techniques even after statistically controlling for student academic and behavioral characteristics, parents’ education, and other possible variables. This study did not, however, support the common belief that teachers are best able to work with better educated parents. Education level was unrelated to use of specific techniques. The belief that poorly educated parents cannot help seems more a consequence of not having used the methods. According to Becker and Epstein (1982), “When the school conditions are poor, when learning problems are severe, when many students need more help than the teacher has time to give, teachers may be more likely to seek
help from parents and to assist parents in workshops to provide the help they need.”

Teachers' attitudes toward use of parent involvement techniques were not closely related to their actual use of the techniques, although most teachers said they needed and wanted parents' assistance. It was interesting that measures of professional climate in their schools had little effect on teachers' practices and attitudes. Support from the principal was related only to the development of parent training workshops, and the practices of other teachers in the school were unrelated to the practice or opinion of parent involvement. Apparently teachers can develop parent involvement strategies without strong nearby support, though it has many advantages.

Conclusions
From what we know so far about parent involvement some themes are beginning to emerge. First, the interest in parent participation is clear, strong, and specific from all sides. Second, while the obstacles are many, educators need to re-examine prevailing beliefs about parents, their capabilities, and interests. It is noteworthy that teachers in one large survey employed a range of parent involvement practices equally as often with poorly educated as with better educated parents (Becker and Epstein, 1982). Also, working mothers help as much with school work and other forms of participation with student learning as do nonemployed mothers, even in the early adolescent years (Medrich, 1982; Tangri and Leitch, 1982).

A third theme is the interest in parent participation beyond the early elementary grades. Where children's basic reading and math skills continue to lag, parents may be able to draw on their own knowledge to help their older children, even if they do not have a high level of education. With high school students, parents in Houston are attracted to parent-teacher conferences because they know they will get test information on their children's occupational interests and the steps necessary to achieve their career goals (Collins and others, 1982).

A fourth theme is the incomplete and evolving nature of research information on parent participation. Different contact techniques may be more appropriate with certain kinds of schools and families, and some kinds of parental assistance may be more easily applied and more beneficial for student learning than others. Sorting out these conditions will take time, the experience of practitioners, and additional study to clarify ambiguous findings to date.

Beyond these themes is the actual development of parent participation programs and practices in schools. Certain strategies seem especially useful (Burns, 1982; Collins and others, 1982). Including teachers and parents in the development of the program can build a sense of shared ownership and a realistic assessment of needs, commitment, and resources on the part of each. Staff training and orientation in relations with culturally different people, conferencing techniques, and other aspects of dealing with parents are at present largely absent. Clear specification and communication of parent and staff roles are needed to make expectations explicit and commonly understood.

Personal contact may be required to recruit parents, who need training if asked for detailed assistance. Special efforts may be required to accommodate diverse circumstances of parents. Evening and weekend meeting times are necessary to reach working mothers and fathers. Recognition of parent contributions can boost their cooperation and sense of involvement. Within the school system, computers can be used to generate more individualized information on students and prescriptions for parent assistance than was previously possible.

These and other techniques and strategies can make home-school relationships function well. Overarching these specifics, and perhaps most important to a successful parent participation program, is the whole-hearted commitment of teachers, schools, and school systems.

References
Burns, J. “The Study of Parental Involvement in Four Federal Education Programs:

“Educators need to re-examine prevailing beliefs about parents, their capabilities, and interests.”
