A New Paradigm for Parent Involvement

In two “Accelerated Schools” in California, educators, students, and communities are working as a team to accomplish their shared goal of success for all students.

Something in the basic structure of American public education is keeping parent involvement from achieving its full potential. I call this basic structural factor the “delegation model.” It is the same rationale American society has used for delegating other functions to government agencies over the past 150 years—fire and police protection, sanitation, public health, welfare, child care, and the like. Once such functions have been delegated under this model, the primary responsibilities left for citizens are to pay taxes and hold officials accountable for the delivery of services.

Reliance on the delegation model in public education has created a fundamental gap between families and schools. Over the years, the model has become institutionalized in the roles, relationships, and mind-sets not only of school staffs but of parents, students, and citizens as well. As a result, efforts by school leaders to involve parents frequently meet with resistance. Parents often signal, subconsciously and overtly, that they don’t have to be involved because the job has been delegated to the schools, just as they don’t have to be involved in putting out fires once the fire department has been given that job. School staffs, for their part, often do not see parent involvement as part of their professional role and, indeed, can quite justifiably see it as an interference with the jobs that have been delegated to them.

We are confronted, then, with the need to discover and implement new policies and practices, as well as to change basic structures, roles, relationships, attitudes, and assumptions. What approach does this analysis suggest? Perhaps an example will help.

The Accelerated Schools Project

In 1986–87, the staffs of Daniel Webster Elementary School in San Francisco and Hoover Elementary School in Redwood City, California, spent a number of months deliberating whether to participate in the “Accelerated Schools” project developed by Professor Henry Levin of Stanford University. Oversimply put, the project called for trying to get all children in these poverty-affected, largely minority schools “up to grade level by the end of 6th grade.” In addition to many other conclusions—such as the need for a language-rich curriculum, motivational teaching methods, and new management structures—the school staffs concluded that there was no way they could reach this goal without the active cooperation and support of the parents. They also realized that they would need more than just a few parent volunteers; they would need all parents (or caretakers) involved in a variety of school, home, and community activities.

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The Will to Do It

Educators may agree with this but feel that changing the fundamental model of public education is too tall an order. They may feel that projects such as the Accelerated Schools, the Comer schools, and other partnership experiments are merely hothouse exotics that can flourish only so long as special efforts and funding are available. This outlook must be taken seriously, since paradigm shifts do not come easily.

My first answer to the doubts about making such a fundamental change is that we know it can be done because it is being done—at least at the individual school level. Yes, it takes special efforts and usually some extra funding to help with the conversion costs of extra planning, trust building, curriculum and program revision, and outreach to parents and community. What it especially takes, though, is the will to do it—and the understanding that, rather than being impractically visionary, it is the most practical way not only to enhance parent involvement but to educate children successfully in today's world.

There are forces at work that make it more feasible to make such a shift today than in years past. Changes in the economy are causing policymakers to call for much higher levels of educational achievement to enable America to maintain its standard of living in the face of international competition and the demands of an information age. This in turn is leading to the recognition that the fundamental structure of public schooling cannot produce the educational levels now required and to powerful pressure for structural changes.

A second and related force is the movement to professionalize teaching, which is also leading to reconsideration of the basic management and accountability structure of public schooling. The Carnegie Task Force on Teaching as a Profession, for example, in seeking ways to recruit high-caliber teachers, recommended a "restructuring" of schools "to provide a professional environment for teachers," including "a radical reorganization of work roles" and indeed a whole "new framework" for public education, with management and accountability at the school level and changes in the existing top-down bureaucratic chain of command.

Empowering All the Players

If these changes were incompatible with the new paradigm needed for parent involvement, it might indeed be impractical to attempt to move toward a partnership parent involvement model. Happily, however, they are not only compatible but mutually reinforcing. Parent involvement would not have evolved as a powerful element in the two Accelerated Schools in California if there had not been a team effort—first of the school staff and then of the staff and parent leaders—to develop their own goals and their own plan for achieving them. The spirit and intensity of the effort to work together—which is at the heart of its potential success—could never have been mandated by top-down bureaucratic directives.

Likewise, the new level of professionalism evidenced at these schools, and the new type of accountability that is developing around it, could not exist without the new relationships with parents, students, and the community. At these two schools, learning about the community and how to work with it is an important part of staff development. What is developing is not only accountability of professional colleagues to each other but the mutual accountability of staff, parents, and students working together for a common goal. This brings a power into the relationship that supersedes the power of bureaucratic control.

The shift to a collaborative model will empower all the players in ways that promise higher levels of social and academic achievement. Without such a shift, it is doubtful that parent involvement will develop to the new levels now needed for excellence in American education.

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2. Site visit and interviews by author, March 1989.

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