

New Paradigms for Parental Involvement

Stronger Family Role in Schools Seen as Key to Achievement

by Rick Allen

Educators focused on school renewal are finding that strengthening parents' involvement in their children's education just may be the "missing link" for improving student achievement.

The increasing inclusion of parents in many aspects of school life, including school decision making, signals a movement away from the century-old "factory-model school" that rarely invited parents in and accepted a 20 percent student failure rate as inevitable, explains Arnold Fege, director of the Public Education Network in Washington, D.C.

A high degree of parent involvement goes against the norm that parents have no guaranteed, or legal, place in schools the way professionals do, says Fege, whose organization promotes the inclusion of parent and community voices in the debate on public education reform. "If districts are going to move parents from fundraising to achievement, they need to consider parents as an integral part of the school program," he adds.

Backed by the Research

Research shows that when parents take time to talk with their children about classroom learning—whether they're discussing books and ideas, preparing for tests and projects, or puzzling over homework—student achievement rises. For their 2002 report *A New Wave of Evidence: The Impact of School, Family, and Community Connections on Student Achievement*, researchers Karen Mapp and Anne Henderson analyzed studies of high-achieving students from all backgrounds and "found that their parents encourage them, talk with them about school, help them plan for higher education, and keep them focused on learning and homework."

Bolstered by the research, the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) calls for schools to write and implement specific plans for parental involvement. Although some question the law's ability to monitor a school's parent involvement program, even critics note that at least NCLB asks more of schools in this regard than has been asked in the past.

Joyce Epstein directs the Center for School, Family, and Community Partnerships at Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore, Md. Her research on six types of parent and community involvement in schools—parenting, communicating, volunteering, learning at home, decision



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making, and collaborating with the community—provides the basis for the National Parent Teacher Association standards for school-home-community relations. Parents and teachers have complementary, but separate, roles that together can nurture the student's growth, Epstein says.

“We don't want parents to be the teachers of every subject in the school—that's the teacher's job. Parents still can be highly supportive in academic areas. Everybody's contribution to the student's learning makes for equal responsibility,” Epstein emphasizes.

Inviting Parents' Input

Leaders in Boston Public Schools have embarked on a campaign that takes seriously NCLB's emphasis on parent, family, and community involvement, under the leadership of Karen Mapp, the district's first deputy superintendent for family and community engagement. Mapp is working to ensure that all 139 Boston schools submit whole-school improvement plans that include parent and community involvement strategies to address student learning.

The plans differ for each school because they're based on local parent surveys, test data, and other academic indicators. Principals receive training that links parent initiatives to learning, and Mapp encourages these administrators to continue studying the research and respond flexibly to parents' needs. “It gives us a chance to cultivate a lot of creative ideas,” says Mapp, who plans to share strategies that succeed in one school with other schools in the district.

At East Boston High School, the Family Center, coordinated by Nina Gaeta, can be found near the school's entrance. East Boston is in a working class neighborhood, and its population is 46 percent Latino, 25 percent black, and 23 percent white. Parents there asked Gaeta for workshops to help them understand the expectations and scoring for the high-stakes exam called the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System (MCAS).

“We give rubrics to parents. So when parents read their child's essay, they'll know why the student might have needed more color in her sentences or needed to show more work in the math problems” on the MCAS, Gaeta says.

At John Winthrop Elementary School, principal Emily Shamieh calls parents “her right arm.” Winthrop engages parents by hosting family curriculum nights that offer tips on making connections at home to literacy, math, and science. Well-attended family field trips help inner-city Boston parents and their children take advantage of cultural opportunities like plays and museums that suburban parents may take for granted. These external activities contribute to the broad base of experiences that help students develop language skills for all subjects, says Shamieh.

Parents who find it difficult to volunteer in person or attend after-school events may volunteer from home by calling other parents or recording children's books for the school's books-on-tape library. To promote curriculum nights, for example, Shamieh asks volunteers from the school's main language groups—Spanish, English, and Cape Verdean Creole—to telephone hard-to-reach parents and encourage them to attend.

“My goal is that the partnership between parents and schools is mutually respectful, highly

supportive, and substantive. It's not about bake sales. It's helping parents be really strong advocates for their students, and giving parents the tools to do so even if the school leadership changes," says Shamieh.

Understanding the Home Life

Even at private schools that can select which students (and families) to enroll, school leaders must work to help parents fully recognize that in their role as primary educator, they influence their children throughout their school careers and into adulthood.

"When parents are not respected and leaned upon as the primary educators that they are, then the school is incapable of competing with the void that the entertainment culture has rushed in to fill," says Michael Moynihan, upper school head at the Heights School, a 3rd to 12th grade boys school in Potomac, Md. "A liberal education requires disciplined training of the mind, and students have to go down a very challenging road to develop intellectual skills."

If a student has academic problems that require a parent-teacher conference, Moynihan encourages teachers to try to understand what's happening at home. It can be a delicate process, but capitalizing on the fact that "parents love talking about their children" can make things easier, he says. In fact, Moynihan suggests, allowing parents to talk is downright essential because when parents articulate how their children spend their time at home, they can reflect more deeply on why their children might be having school problems.

Last fall, an expert on family involvement assessed the school's efforts and suggested increasing programs for new parents and seeking ways to foster gatherings in parents' homes to discuss school and family issues.

Sharing Decision Making

A team approach works for Roosevelt Elementary Magnet School in St. Paul, Minn., which serves a diverse community of Latino, Hmong, African American, Native American, and white students. The school's 12-member Action Team for Partnership (ATP) includes the principal, teachers, parents, grandparents, and community partners, who select and organize family involvement activities. Last year, the ATP held "Girls Night In," which gave 3rd grade girls, mothers, and others a chance to hear women talk about their careers and the educational paths that led them there.

The school's site council, which makes decisions with principal Maria Castro about school budget priorities, also boasts a diverse group of parent members. Because of budget cuts, Castro and the council last year decided to reduce staff, including, ironically, the family involvement coordinator. They wanted to maintain the number of English-as-a-second-language teachers and school counselors and preserve small class sizes at Roosevelt, where half the students are English language learners. Castro said she and council members agreed that the parent liaison position could be sacrificed because strong parental involvement has become "self-sustaining" at Roosevelt.

Through involvement in the site council, "parents are better informed and are comfortable that

adequate funds are given to areas that will increase student achievement," Castro says.

Parents of the Future

Castro notes that Roosevelt's family initiatives will have an effect now and in the future. So, she says, policymakers need to factor in funding for programs like Roosevelt's that extend beyond the school day and foster parental and community involvement.

With the help of such initiatives "parents are modeling for their own children about how to be involved," adds Castro. "And these children will become the next generation who will reach out to their own children."

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