

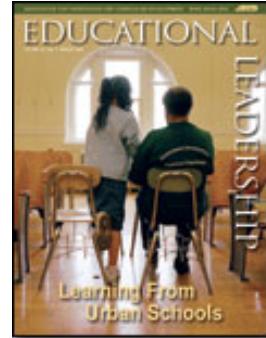
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The Rewards of Parent Participation

The experience of the School Development Program shows that parental involvement benefits not only students and schools, but also parents themselves.



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In 1968–1969, King Elementary School in New Haven, Connecticut, became one of two low-performing schools to pilot our Yale Child Study Center School Development Program. The families served by the school were almost all poor and African American. In a school that served about 300 students, 15 parents turned out for that year's school winter holiday program.

Three years later, with no change in the demographics, more than 400 parents, kin, and friends attended the same program. By this time, families were involved in almost all aspects of the school's work.

Through previous Child Study Center work in schools, we had learned that we could not enforce parental involvement through administrative mandates or by touting the benefits of participation. Thus, the School Development Program did not immediately impose an intervention designed to improve parent participation. Instead, our five-person team moved into King Elementary and provided mental health and social services.

Working with students, parents, and school staff, we experienced small successes and gradually built mutual respect and trust. All participants were then able to collaborate in creating a positive community. Because parents sensed that they were welcome and could contribute something of value, they became more involved in the work of the school and in the education of their children.

Some people argue that times have changed and that schools today have more difficulty getting parents involved—that parents are busier, younger, and often living in more dysfunctional settings. But in our work, we still observe the same transition from reluctance to enthusiastic participation when we make coordinated, systematic efforts to create inclusive school cultures.

Parents in Dysfunctional Schools

The School Development Program has now worked in more than 1,000 schools. More than two-thirds have been high-minority, low-income elementary schools. In general, these sites were characterized by a dysfunctional culture in which parent participation was either minimal or negative.

Even when dysfunctional schools don't have overwhelming behavior problems, many parents stay away. Some of these parents had poor experiences in schools themselves. Although they would like to see their children have better experiences, they don't expect this to happen. Often, the education and social status of people who work in the school intimidate undereducated and poor parents. Differences in race, religion, income, and ethnicity might cause tension. Some parents are under economic stress and have little time or energy. Because of these and many other factors, low-income urban parents need compelling reasons to get involved in their children's schooling (Epstein & Salinas, 2004).

In the most severely dysfunctional schools, parents, teachers, and administrators don't like, trust, or respect one another. The culture of low academic and social performance reinforces all things negative and generates blame. Understandably, parents avoid such settings except when they become angry or when they believe they need to protect their children from unfair treatment. Parents may even threaten to physically attack teachers. When people feel powerless and do not expect to make progress through participation and negotiation, they may gain satisfaction through overly assertive and aggressive interactions (Hirschhorn & Barnett, 1993).

An incident in one of our pilot schools illustrates this combative disposition. Toward the end of the third year of the School Development Program, I gave a report on the progress of the school. All of the parents seemed pleased, except for one parent who angrily challenged me throughout the presentation, as she had often done in the past. But as the two of us cleaned up the meeting room together, she said, "See you next year. I sure enjoy fighting with you!"

Today, the notion that parents have an important role to play in schools has gained increasing acceptance. But even when schools expect and encourage parent participation, many educators don't quite understand how it is supposed to work. Teachers fear adversarial relationships, or "somebody looking over my shoulder." Some schools want parents to cooperate by keeping their children under control but resist involving the parents in discussions about school organization, management, culture, teaching, and learning. When parents receive these mixed or disingenuous messages, they sense that they are unwanted. Thus, many schools that believe they are encouraging parents to participate nevertheless find that the parents don't respond (Mapp, 1997).

From the beginning of our work in schools, we were struck by this mixture of parents' hesitancy to get involved and educators' subtle and even unintentional resistance to parental involvement. But on the positive side, we were equally struck by the fact that parents, school staff, and students all wanted to succeed. We found that if parents could be involved in ways that threatened neither the parents nor the teachers, parental involvement would reach a critical mass that could transform even the most dysfunctional school.

The Child Development Perspective

In the School Development Program, a growing understanding of the problems leading to parental paralysis and dysfunction helped us develop a nine-element framework for change (see "The SDP Framework for Change," p. 40). The framework is based on the theory that student academic performance, behavior, and preparation for school and life can be greatly improved when the adult stakeholders work together in a respectful, collaborative way to create a school climate or culture that supports development, good instruction, and academic learning.

The basis of our theory of change—and the rationale for meaningful parent participation in the work of schools—is our developmental perspective. We put child development at the center of parent and educator thinking about school improvement. In our program schools, teams often discuss the role of parents as a child's first teachers. We explain that children are born into the world thinking and learning in order to survive; that they bond to their caretakers; that they identify with, imitate, and internalize the caretakers' attitudes and values. Interactions with their children enable caretakers to help children grow along crucial developmental pathways—physical, social-interactive, psycho-emotional, ethical, linguistic, and cognitive (Comer, Joyner, & Ben-Avie, 2004).

Academic learning is an acquired interest that students usually gain through social, emotional, and cognitive interactions with meaningful others. Thus, academic learning and healthy development are inextricably linked. Parents and teachers must work together, seamlessly supporting development at home and at school.

Insights from Experience

In School Development Program schools, the existing parent association is rejuvenated as the Parent Team. Through their representatives on the School Planning and Management Team, parents help to create a yearlong, schoolwide schedule of activities designed to support instruction and to create positive relationships in the school. But perhaps more important, they support this comprehensive school plan, particularly its social component. They organize a set of activities to inform parents—discussions about child-rearing, work readiness, how to access out-of-school services, and the like.

The Parent Team also works with teachers to plan the usual back-to-school, Thanksgiving, and other holiday events as purposeful parts of the comprehensive school plan that support students' developmental needs. This differs from other schools, where social activities often have no clear purpose beyond entertainment and therefore are vulnerable to being eliminated in response to pressures for more academics.

Parental input has helped us to identify several simple but important conditions that could limit the benefits of social activities. For example, before trust is established, the parents tend to gather on one side of the room and the staff on the other. A parent-teacher matching process can make the intent clear and encourage better interaction. One school gives teachers and parents numbers and asks those teachers and parents with matching numbers to sit and engage with each other during the event. We have noted that parents turn out more often

when food is served, particularly when they are involved in its preparation—for instance, through potluck dinners or ethnic festivals. They are also more likely to attend events when their children are on the program. The need to care for other children in the family can prevent some parents from attending events; providing a babysitter at school during the event can overcome this obstacle.

An important component of the Parent Team is a staff liaison, who helps parents develop such skills as using an agenda, promoting input from all members, considering benefits and negative consequences of various proposals, setting priorities, making decisions, and interacting constructively with staff members. When parents gain the necessary skills to carry out their own programs and to participate in the larger school program, the staff liaison becomes less active. Providing this support to facilitate success is particularly crucial in schools serving many undereducated families. These parents are often capable and proud, but they initially lack the skills and confidence needed to fully participate in school programs. Because they are proud, the support must be subtle, goal-oriented, and temporary.

Experience has also taught us to have realistic expectations. Early on, we were concerned about the overall level of parent participation. Although some parents attended events regularly and some activities attracted many parents, we were unable to achieve the high level of parental participation that we believed was optimal. Eventually, however, we realized that this behavior was inevitable in organizations. We therefore created participation goals at three levels that took this natural pattern into account:

- *Level 1:* Parents provide general support by attending parent-teacher conferences, monitoring their children's homework, and supporting fund-raising activities. They participate in calendar events, such as school concerts and awards ceremonies. This level attracts the largest number of parents.
- *Level 2:* Parents serve as volunteers in daily school affairs—for example, by providing office support, going along on field trips, or working as library assistants. It is important to give these parent volunteers meaningful tasks that they are capable of accomplishing and to place them with compatible staff members.
- *Level 3:* Parents participate in school decision making by serving on the School Planning and Management Team or on other school committees. Parent representation in the governance and management of the school should be as broadly based as possible (School Development Program, 2001).

A Broad Range of Benefits

A significant body of research suggests that parent participation in school improves the academic achievement of students (Henderson & Mapp, 2002). Additional research shows that life success is more likely when students receive continual, constructive support from meaningful adults who serve as role models and motivators (Adger, 2001).

The School Development Program's long experience has established that parent participation in schools can be helpful to students, school staff, and the parents themselves—often in

unexpected ways. Highly involved parents can be some of the most effective advocates for education. District administrators and elected officials tend to respond much more positively to school requests when those requests come from parents and staff members together. At one school, a new parent forcefully proposed to the Parent Team that they march on City Hall because the superintendent had not responded to the school's problem of overcrowding. A veteran parent helped her consider the downside of such action; instead, they sent a letter to the superintendent and copies to the city alderperson and mayor and received a prompt and positive response.

Parents with experience in program schools also serve as dependable defenders of teachers. For example, when angry parents misguidedly attack a teacher's discipline measures, other parents in school leadership positions may help the complaining parents focus on how they can help their children become more responsible instead of blaming the school.

Another bonus of parent participation in School Development Program schools has been the positive, powerful impact of the experience on the lives of the parents themselves. For example, after a Politics and Government curriculum unit that parents helped to design and attended themselves, some of the participants registered and voted in city and state elections for the first time in their lives. Involvement in school activities has also motivated many parents to further their own education and to secure jobs and promotions that they previously believed were out of reach. One low-income parent went from high school dropout status to a master's degree and a professional career. Two of her children are now engineers; another is a lawyer, and the fourth is a physician.

Such parents cite as major factors in their success the respect and sense of belonging they received from school staff members. Parents gained confidence as they engaged in school activities. They discovered that they had competencies they were not using, and they also developed new skills. As parents support the activities that the school provides for their children, they are exposed to larger opportunities and they open their minds to their own possibilities. Parental involvement in School Development Program schools not only improves teaching and learning; it can also transform families' lives.

The SDP Framework for Change

The School Development Program (SDP) framework for change is based on nine elements: three structures, three guiding principles, and three school operations.

Structures

- *School Planning and Management Team.* This team, made up of administrators, teachers, support staff, and parents, develops a comprehensive school plan; sets academic, social, and community relations goals; and coordinates all school activities.
- *Student and Staff Support Team.* The principal and staff members with

expertise in mental health—such as counselors, social workers, psychologists, and nurses—serve on this team to connect student services, facilitate the sharing of information and advice, address individual student needs, find resources outside the school, and develop prevention programs.

- *Parent Team*. This team develops activities that support the school's social and academic programs.

Guiding Principles

- No-fault problem solving.
- Consensus decision making.
- Collaboration.

School Operations Supervised by the School Planning and Management Team

- Development of the comprehensive school plan, including curriculum, instruction, and assessment, as well as social and academic climate goals based on a developmental understanding of students.
- Staff development.
- Assessment and modification.

Source: School Development Program, Yale Child Study Center. (2001). *Overview of the School Development Program* [Online]. Available: www.info.med.yale.edu/comer/about/overview.html

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