

**Literature Review on  
Family Involvement:  
The Home-School Partnership**

Christie Blazer, Senior Research Analyst  
Research Services  
Office of Accountability and Systemwide Performance  
Miami-Dade County Public Schools  
1500 Biscayne Boulevard, Suite 225  
Miami, Florida 33132  
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Family involvement refers to activities families engage in to support their children's education (Drake, 2000). When families become involved in their children's education, students, schools, and communities all benefit because strong home-school partnerships help all stakeholders focus on the real issue of high student achievement (Caplan, 2000). This report examines the benefits of family involvement, the different ways families can become involved, the barriers to involvement, and strategies that schools can implement to involve all families and increase student achievement.

### Benefits of Family Involvement

Meaningful family involvement is a powerful predictor of high student achievement. Students attain more educational success when schools and families work together to motivate, socialize, and educate students (Caplan, 2000). Students whose families are involved in their education typically receive higher grades and test scores, complete more homework, have better attendance, and exhibit more positive attitudes and behaviors. Children of involved families also graduate at higher rates and are more likely to enroll in postsecondary education programs (Riggins-Newby, 2004; Norton, 2003; Caplan, 2000; Binkley et al., 1998; Funkhouse and Gonzalez, 1997). Henderson (1987) found that the academic benefits gained from family involvement with elementary school students continued through the middle and senior high school levels. Furthermore, studies have observed these positive outcomes regardless of students' ethnic or racial background or socioeconomic status, noting that students at risk of failure have the most to gain when schools involve families (Caplan, 2000; Funkhouse and Gonzalez, 1997; Henderson, 1987).

When families become involved in their children's education, they have a better understanding of what is being taught in school and of teaching and learning in general. They gain more information about children's knowledge and abilities, as well as the programs and services offered by the school (Moorman, 2002; Caplan, 2000; Drake, 2000). Research has found that when parents are involved, their confidence in their ability to help their children with classroom assignments increases (Nistler and Maiers, 2000) and they rate teachers higher in overall teaching ability (Caplan, 2000).

Educators benefit when family involvement is strong, as school staff gain an awareness of the ways they can build on family strengths to support students' success (Caplan, 2000). As teachers understand more about students' lives, they are able to connect learning outside of the school to classroom learning in real and meaningful ways (Ferguson, 2004).

### Types of Family Involvement

Research shows that all types of family involvement are effective in raising students' levels of achievement. Some studies have found that parents' involvement in different roles over time has the greatest impact on students' academic success (Caplan, 2000). Family participation in well-designed at-home activities has also been found to have an especially strong positive effect on student achievement (Epstein and Jansorn, 2004). There are numerous ways families can become involved in children's education. The following types of family involvement have been published by the National PTA as *National Standards for Parent/Family Involvement Programs* (Epstein and Jansorn, 2004). Family involvement programs should include activities from all six areas of involvement.

- Parent education. Parenting skills should be promoted and supported so families can build positive home environments that support learning. Schools should provide families with information about topics such as adolescent health and safety, nutrition, and discipline so students arrive at school well rested, well fed, and clothed (Ferguson, 2004; Caplan, 2000; Drake, 2000; Epstein, 1987).
- Communication between schools and families. When schools establish regular and meaningful communication between the home and school, families are informed about school programs and children's progress and are better able to help children select courses and activities (Drake, 2000; Epstein, 1987).
- Volunteer opportunities. Family members should be encouraged to participate in and support school events, meetings, and activities. Family members should also volunteer in the classroom and help with field trips (Ferguson, 2004; Caplan, 2000; Drake, 2000; Epstein, 1987).
- At-home learning activities. Family members should play a central role in assisting student progress by providing children with home-based learning activities, supervising homework, and helping with classroom assignments (Ferguson, 2004; Caplan, 2000; Epstein, 1987).
- Decision-making opportunities. Families should be partners in decisions affecting their children by holding participatory roles in parent-teacher-student organizations, school advisory councils, and school committees (Caplan, 2000; Drake, 2000; Epstein, 1987).
- Collaborating with the community. Schools, families, and students should establish connections with local agencies, businesses, cultural groups, and community organizations that share responsibility for students' future success. Families should be advocates for the school by supporting efforts to increase school funding and encouraging local businesses to contribute to school programs (Caplan, 2000; Drake, 2000; Epstein, 1987).

The American Association of School Administrators (1998) has identified six roles parents like to play and suggests that educators consider the possible activities suited to each role, then customize the involvement of each parent by fitting his or her strengths and interests with the needs of the school.

- Change Agent. This parent is viewed as an advocate for students' needs and likes to help make decisions, create policies, and influence others to support positive change in targeted areas. Activities for this type of parent include membership on policy boards, tasks forces, and advisory councils.
- Communicator. This parent is a networker who lets other parents know what's going on in the school. Activities suited to this type of parent include coordinating telephone trees, writing and distributing newsletters, and organizing parent groups.
- Tutor. This parent is a semi-professional teacher who likes to help with the actual education of students. Activities for this parent include tutoring individuals or small groups of students at school or home, providing enrichment programs, and teaching family literacy.
- Program Coordinator. This parent has the marketing and coordination skills to organize

programs that benefit the entire school or district. Activities for this type of parent include organizing fund raisers, school carnivals, holiday programs, appreciation luncheons, and social events.

- Front-line Assistant. This parent is a “Guy/Girl Friday” who enjoys performing hands-on tasks in the classroom or school office. Activities suited to this type of parent include serving as a classroom aide or field trip chaperone, grading papers, making copies, and doing whatever needs to be done.
- Community Liaison. This parent has a talent for finding outside resources that meet school and student needs. Activities for this parent include maintaining contact and developing relationships with community organizations, such as the chamber of commerce and local businesses.

### Barriers to Family Involvement

Barriers to involvement exist for both schools and families. Some barriers are created by limited resources, while others originate from the beliefs, perceptions, and attitudes of families and school staff (Liontos, 1992). The most common barriers to family involvement include:

- Lack of teacher time. Teachers often see working on family involvement as a task added to an already long list of responsibilities (Caplan, 2000).
- Teachers’ misperceptions of parents’ abilities. Some teachers believe parents can’t help their children because they have limited educational backgrounds themselves; however, many poorly educated families support learning by talking with their children about school, monitoring homework, and making it clear that education is important and that they expect their children to do well in school (Caplan, 2000).
- Lack of understanding of parents’ communication styles. Some efforts at increasing involvement fail because there is a mismatch in the communication styles of families and teachers, often due to cultural and language differences (Caplan, 2000; Liontos, 1992).
- Limited family resources. Lack of time is the major reason given by family members for why they don’t get more involved. Lack of transportation and child care also keep families from participating (Caplan, 2000).
- Parents’ lack of comfort. Some parents feel intimidated and unwelcome at school. Many parents had negative school experiences themselves or are so unfamiliar with the American culture that they do not want to get involved or feel unsure about the value of their contributions. Barriers are also created by parents who have feelings of inadequacy or are suspicious of or angry at the school (Jones, 2001; Caplan, 2000; Liontos, 1992).
- Tension in relationships between parents and teachers. Parent and teacher focus groups, conducted around the country as part of the Parents As School Partners research project, identified common areas of conflict between parents and teachers (Baker, 2000).
- Parents felt that teachers waited too long before telling them about a problem and that they only heard from teachers when there was bad news. Most parents felt they didn’t have easy

or ongoing access to their children's teachers and that teachers blamed parents when children had problems in school. Some parents felt unwelcome at the school, believed schools didn't really want their input, and thought communication was a one-way system, with schools sending out information and parents having few, if any, opportunities to share ideas with the school.

- Teachers believed parents didn't respect them, challenged their authority, and questioned their decisions. They believed parents encouraged students to disrespect them. Teachers resented that not all parents sent their children to school ready to learn and wanted parents to follow through more with the academic and disciplinary suggestions they made.
- Mobility. Some urban areas have low rates of home ownership. Families that rent tend to move around a lot more, which makes it harder to build relationships between families and school staff (Metropolitan St. Louis, 2004).
- Lack of vested interest. Many families don't see the value in participating and don't believe their involvement will result in any meaningful change (American Association of School Administrators, 1998).
- Difficulties of involvement in the upper grades. There is typically less parent involvement at the middle and senior high school levels, as adolescents strive for greater autonomy and separation from their parents. Families often live further from the school their child attends and are less able to spend time there (Caplan, 2000).

Although the benefits of family involvement are numerous and have been well documented, a review of the literature found that family involvement programs were often not fully implemented for the following reasons (Drake, 2000):

- School staff had not been trained to work with families.
- Administrators and teachers worried that increased family involvement would add to their already busy schedules.
- Educators were concerned that closer relationships with families would mean giving up power and decision-making.
- Families were not sure how far they could go making suggestions or asking questions; they worried that children would be punished for their parents' actions by a teacher or principal who was annoyed or threatened by the parent.

### Successful Home-School Partnerships

Home-school collaboration occurs when parents and educators share common goals and are seen as equals. Successful partnerships look beyond the traditional definition of family involvement to a broader view of family members as full partners in the education of children and as key resources for improving students' education. Partnerships view student achievement as a shared responsibility, with all stakeholders, including parents, administrators, teachers, and community leaders, playing an important role in supporting students' education (Caplan, 2000; Funkhouse and Gonzalez, 1997).

Successful school-family partnerships require the sustained mutual collaboration and support of school staff and families. Schools have the primary responsibility for initiating the school-family partnership. Schools must invest heavily in professional development activities that support family involvement, create time for staff to work with families, supply the necessary resources, design innovative strategies to meet the needs of diverse families, and provide information to families on how to contribute to students' learning. Once schools initiate this collaboration, most families will be willing to assume responsibility for the success of their children's education (Funkhouse and Gonzalez, 1997).

Rather than trying to increase family participation only in school-based activities, successful schools support families in activities outside of school that encourage learning. Home-school partnerships should include the establishment of relationships between school staff and those who live and work in the communities surrounding the school. School staff should visit families, businesses, and community organizations to determine how additional learning opportunities can be created for students (Ferguson, 2004).

### Strategies for Successfully Implementing a Family Involvement Program

Effective strategies for involving families differ from community to community. Programs should be tailored to meet the unique needs and interests, time and talents, and ages and grade levels of students and families (American Association of School Administrators, 1998). Successful approaches to promoting family involvement share an emphasis on innovation and flexibility. School leadership must recognize that family involvement takes many forms that may not require parents' presence at the school. The program's emphasis should be on families helping their children learn at school, in the home, and in the community (Funkhouse and Gonzalez, 1997). Strategies for reducing the barriers to family involvement and implementing a successful family involvement program include:

- Start with a needs assessment. Using information generated from a needs assessment allows the school's goals and programs to be developed based on real needs and increases the chance of program success (Caplan, 2000). Schools should survey family members to determine their satisfaction with the school and its programs. Staff can be asked to discuss the current status of family involvement and identify which practices worked well. Specific areas to consider in the needs assessment include (Project Appleseed, 2003; Caplan, 2000):
  - Which present practices should change and which should continue?
  - How do you want your school's family involvement program to look three years from now?
  - What costs are associated with the desired improvements?
  - How will you evaluate the results of your efforts?
  - Were staff able to involve some families more than others?

Schools can form an Action Team that includes the principal, teachers, support staff, family members, and community partners. The Action Team should be responsible for writing a plan to identify and schedule family and community activities. The team can organize and publicize all activities and gather input to continually increase family and community involvement (Epstein and Jansorn, 2004).

- Redefine parent involvement. Cookie baking, paper shuffling, and “showing up” activities traditionally associated with family involvement are not likely to have much impact on student achievement (Jones, 2001). Not all families can be involved in conventional activities, such as volunteering in the classroom or chaperoning field trips, but most want to be involved. To include these families, schools can offer a number of non-traditional family involvement activities (Moorman, 2002). The locations and times of school activities and events should be varied since some family members can only attend activities in the evening or on weekends. Others feel uncomfortable in schools but still want to participate. Churches, cultural groups, libraries, and public buildings are all potential locations where family meetings and events can take place. Offering transportation and child care services will increase the number of family members who are able to attend events (National Institute for Urban School Improvement, 2004). Since many students have large, extended families that can support their education, family involvement programs should also be sure to include all family members who have responsibility for the child (Wherry, 2003).

Family involvement programs can team up family members who don't feel comfortable at the school with family members who are more familiar and comfortable with schools and who share similar cultural and language backgrounds. Family-to-family mentoring has been found to be most effective, but teachers and other school staff can serve as mentors if necessary. Mentors can orient new families to the school, explain school policies and programs, attend meetings to introduce new families to school staff and other families, and be available by telephone to answer questions (National Institute for Urban School Improvement, 2004).

Studies show that participation increases when parents interact with each other (Nistler and Maiers, 2000). Initially, families tend to turn to the child's teacher for support and assistance. Over time, however, families increasingly turn to each other for support and information and rely less on the teacher.

Family members can learn a lot about what's happening at the school by shadowing (or following around) a student and discovering what it's like to be a student at the school. Family members can then share the experience with other families. Shadowing works best when the student is chosen randomly and is not a relative of the participating family member (National Institute for Urban School Improvement, 2004).

- Tailor programs to schools' specific needs. There is no “one size fits all” approach to increasing family involvement. The most appropriate strategies will depend on local interests, needs, and resources. Identify the strengths, interests, and needs of families, schools, and staff and design strategies that correspond to these identified areas (Caplan, 2000; Funkhouse and Gonzalez, 1997).
- Clarify how parents can be involved. Many parents don't know how to get involved in their children's education. Research shows that most parents who aren't involved would like to be, but need school staff to show them how to help their children improve their academic performance. To encourage involvement, schools must provide family members with encouragement and direction (Epstein and Jansorn, 2004; Caplan, 2000).
- Use every opportunity to promote family involvement. Some suggested activities for promoting family involvement include:

- Offer tours of the building and encourage all staff members to be present to welcome visitors. Familiarity with the school makes parents more likely to be involved in school activities (Duncan, 2002; Wherry, 2002).
- Develop a list of volunteer opportunities so families can check off the activities they are interested in (Duncan, 2002; Wherry, 2002).
- Use bulletin boards, the school's web site, and phone calls to inform family members of volunteer opportunities (Duncan, 2002; Wherry, 2002).
- Encourage teachers to call the parents of their students during the first few weeks of the school year. Establishing a positive relationship early lays the foundation for good relationships all year long (Wherry, 2002).
- Send home school newsletters that include important school telephone numbers, critical dates, and specifics on how parents can support the school and help their children learn at home (Wherry, 2002).
- Plan a back-to-school night or open house to showcase the school's goals and explain how families can help the school to achieve them (Wherry, 2002).
- Hold Family Nights to build a sense of community by giving family members the opportunity to interact with school staff. Family Nights can take many forms, including:
  - Parent training on helping children develop the cognitive and social skills needed in school (Panfil, 2001).
  - Family Game Night, using different classrooms for different types of games (for example, board games, physical movement games, knowledge-based games, and hands-on activities), to encourage families to play games together on a regular basis (McLean and Chamberlin, 2000).
  - Scavenger hunts to familiarize families with the school building and grounds (McLean and Chamberlin, 2000).
  - Pajama parties where families of elementary students come to the school in the evening with their favorite bedtime stories to read and eat milk and cookies. At the secondary level, the pajama party can be substituted for Movie Night, with popcorn and a discussion of the movie (National Institute for Urban School Improvement, 2004).
- Foster a climate of mutual respect and trust. Schools too often focus on what families can do for the school and not enough on what the school can do for families to create safe, stable environments for children (Ferguson, 2004). An atmosphere of mutual respect and trust must be created before partnerships will be truly effective (Baker, 2000). Staff should recognize that all family members have strengths to share with the school. While educators are experts on teaching and learning, no one knows children better than their parents (Wherry, 2002). School personnel should understand the many ways families can support their children's learning and convey to families that each way is valuable. Studies have found that parents' attitudes about school staff are a deciding factor in whether they are productive partners with the school (Caplan, 2000).

Schools must create opportunities for parents and teachers to have regular contact and develop rapport early in the school year. That way, if a problem arises, trust has been established that will facilitate discussions of the problem. As relationships develop, families will find that their ideas and help are needed, not just tolerated (Ferguson, 2004). The Parents As School Partners research project found that the most common issue cited by both parents and teachers was a sense of being misunderstood, with principals feeling caught in the middle (Baker, 2000).

- Be respectful of diversity. Economic and cultural differences must be considered when planning family involvement activities, but shouldn't be seen as predictive of failure. Parents of high-achieving students tend to have higher expectations for their children's education and be more involved than parents of low-achieving students. Parents of low achievers, therefore, may need more encouragement and guidance to become involved than parents of high achievers (Scott-Stein and Thorkildsen, 2000).

School staff should be respectful and accommodating of the diversity of all families. Cultural and language differences can be addressed by offering bilingual services for communicating with families and promoting cultural understanding to help build trust between the home and school (Caplan, 2000; Funkhouse and Gonzalez, 1997).

- Welcome families. Families must feel welcome and comfortable in the school. Staff should make sure that schools are inviting and accessible to all families (Caplan, 2000; Funkhouse and Gonzalez, 1997).

Suggestions for establishing a climate that makes families feel welcome and valued include (National Institute for Urban School Improvement, 2004; Duncan, 2002; Wherry, 2002; Caplan, 2000):

- Have students or family members serve as greeters or ambassadors during busy arrival and dismissal times or when there will be a lot of visitors.
- Hire staff who speak parents' language and send bilingual materials home to parents.
- Create a family room by setting aside a comfortable space in the school where families can meet and talk with other families, teachers, and community members. The space might include a telephone and computer, school calendar, an area where announcements and resource materials are posted, paper, pencils, and a sealed comment box for family members' questions and opinions. If space is limited, pick one morning or afternoon a week and turn a room used for other purposes into a family room.

Sometimes, parents' ideas or behaviors are unreasonable. Unreasonable parents give family involvement a bad name and cause some educators to avoid unnecessary contact with parents. Avoiding contact, however, is the wrong reaction. Research has found that the worst family-school relationships are seen in schools that don't welcome family involvement. To address the problem of "overly involved parents," set up a parent to council consider family-school issues. A policy, developed by parents and teachers, should lay out the rules for visiting classes, seeing the principal, taking students out of school during the day, obtaining records, and other issues of interest to family members. When parents ask for something not covered by the policy, the parent council should be convened to consider the request (Jones, 2001).

- Communicate with families regularly. Communication is the foundation of effective partnerships. School staff should give parents the information they want and need. Parents' top concerns are usually what's being taught, how school funds are spent, and how school policies are formed (Wherry, 2003). School staff should use every available opportunity to contact parents and use a variety of methods to communicate with parents, including handouts, newsletters, notes from teachers, telephone calls, e-mail, fax, and the school's web site (Caplan, 2000; Funkhouse and Gonzalez, 1997).

One way to communicate with families is the Family Connections Newsletter. These newsletters can be sent to families on a regular basis to provide descriptions and explanations of school initiatives and policies, explain testing programs and educational innovations, and suggest activities families can do together at home to reinforce student learning (National Institute for Urban School Improvement, 2004).

Communication between schools and home should be two-way, with school staff actively seeking information and opinions from parents (Caplan, 2000). Studies have found that parents believe that approximately 95 percent of school communication is one-way, with school officials telling parents what they or their children should be doing (Jones, 2001).

It's important to know what families think of the school and their children's progress. Instead of sending home a long survey, use opportunities when families are at school to collect their responses to one or two survey questions they can answer quickly. Schools can use mini surveys on index cards or wall and marker surveys (a large sheet of paper on the wall with one or two survey questions and a bucket of markers). Results should be shared with families, since studies have found that family members are more likely to respond to surveys if they have received summaries of results in the past (National Institute for Urban School Improvement, 2004).

Many parents believe that their children's teachers only contact them with bad news. When teachers notify parents of their children's accomplishments, parents realize that teacher-parent communication isn't always negative (Caplan, 2000). The personal approach should be used whenever possible. Newsletters and printed announcements are easy ways to provide information to large numbers of families, but they have limited effectiveness. A study by Nistler and Maiers (2000) found that most parents appreciated personal contacts and telephone calls that conveyed positive messages.

The National Institute for Urban School Improvement (2004) suggests that teachers send "Conversation Cards" home with students as a way for family members to learn more about what's going on in the school. The cards can provide families with information about the classroom, such as the classroom schedule, classroom activities, and organization of the room, so family members can engage in conversations with children about their day in school.

Weekly Friday Folders are another way for teachers to establish a consistent system for sharing information with families. The folders, brought home by students each Friday, can include a letter from the principal, requests for family volunteers, information on standards and testing, curriculum tips, lunch menus, school activities, and a listing of school clubs and organizations (National Institute for Urban School Improvement, 2004).

- Emphasize the parent-child relationship. Although it is important to get families into the building as frequently as possible, what they do with children at home is often more important than what they do at school (Wherry, 2003). Programs designed to improve parent and child relationships should be emphasized since most research indicates that the way parents relate to their children at home has a strong impact on student achievement. Research shows that parents who interact with their children by providing a supportive home environment promote higher student success in school. Parents should be encouraged to express high expectations for their children's educational future and engage

in home discussions, reading sessions, and at-home learning activities (Norton and Nufeld, 2002).

Family members can reinforce what's being taught at school by engaging in integrated learning. Integrated learning builds learning into activities that families already routinely engage in, such as cooking meals, cleaning the house, playing games, and visiting a library or museum. Integrated learning gives families the opportunity to reinforce classroom learning and allows students to better understand how to use school learning in their lives outside of school (National Institute for Urban School Improvement, 2004).

- Provide training for family members. High quality training programs will increase parent participation. Many family members are intimidated by educators and avoid them. Training builds understanding, helps families share ideas with each other, and allows family members and school staff to interact in a less threatening environment. If resources are available, schools should pay a professional who can send a strong message in an entertaining way (Moorman, 2002). Some family education topics include (Duncan, 2002; Wherry, 2002):
  - how and why families should get involved in children's education;
  - how family involvement will improve children's grades, attendance, and behavior;
  - how becoming involved in parent-teacher organizations helps both parents and children;
  - how to structure the home environment to facilitate learning; and
  - the importance of discussions at home about postsecondary opportunities and career goals.

Workshops should be offered to provide family members with information about the school and how they can reinforce what's being taught at school, both academically and socially. Workshops should also obtain input from parents about their opinions on important school issues, assess their understanding of school programs, and ascertain their personal interests and abilities (Caplan, 2000; Vaupel and Bradley, 1995). Studies have shown that parents appreciate workshops that provide information on topics such as child safety, nutrition, preadolescent development, parenting skills, academic support services, and conflict management skills (Vaupel and Bradley, 1995).

The National Institute for Urban School Improvement (2004) suggests that schools hold "Family Fad Classes" on topics such as gardening, dancing, photography, cooking, outdoor skills, creative writing, and career options. The curriculum will be enhanced with new content and, if family members volunteer to teach a topic, they will be participating in ways that draw upon their own strengths.

- Provide training for school staff. Schools should provide staff development activities for teachers and support staff to help them learn how to work with families. Teachers are the primary link between schools and families, but many teachers don't enjoy interacting with families because they have not been trained to do so. Studies have found that few teachers received training in how to work with families as part of their graduate programs (Jones, 2001; Baker, 2000). Research suggests that teachers' interpersonal skills and professional merit have a significant effect on parents' perceptions and willingness to participate (Epstein, 1988).

Studies show that staff development and guidance spread out over time are more effective than one-shot workshops (Jones, 2001). Topics to cover when training school staff to work with families include (Caplan, 2000):

- benefits of family involvement;
  - communicating with families about student progress;
  - conducting family conferences;
  - involving families as volunteers, tutors, and guest speakers;
  - referring families to community agencies;
  - helping family members understand class goals, strategies, and assessment methods;
  - working with parents when their child has a problem in class; and
  - knowledge of cultural beliefs and values, family structures, and child rearing practices.
- Provide staff with the necessary time. School leadership must recognize the time and commitment needed on the part of educators to increase the effectiveness of family involvement programs. Schools should explore ways to build family involvement into teachers' daily routines. Teachers have many creative ideas about how to increase family involvement, but usually don't have any formal time built into their day to implement these ideas. Teachers feel pressured to work with families and frustrated because they don't have the time to do so. Some schools budget funds to pay staff for extra time required to engage with families or fund a home-school coordinator position (Baker, 2000; Caplan, 2000).
  - Recognize and reward family involvement. Schools can improve the effectiveness of family involvement programs by recognizing and thanking school staff, family volunteers, and community and business partners for their time and contributions. Family members can be recognized for the most classroom visits, the most help provided to teachers, or the most books read aloud. Staff can be recognized for the most parent phone calls, the most home visits, the most parent group members, or the best idea to involve families. Community and business partners can be recognized for the time and resources they provided to the school (Blank et al., 2004; Epstein and Jansorn, 2004; Wherry, 2002; Giba, 1999).
  - Recruit community stakeholders as partners. The success of family involvement programs can be enhanced if schools partner with community stakeholders, including local businesses, community organizations, public agencies, and colleges and universities. Schools should develop long-term partnerships with community groups that will bring resources into the school. Schools should take advantage of the training and assistance offered by these external sources, including money donated to improve the quality of schools and participation in school-to-work programs (Blank et al., 2004; Epstein and Jansorn, 2004; Duncan, 2000; Funkhouse and Gonzalez, 1997).

If families are preoccupied with basic needs, they will be unable to direct their full attention to academic activities. The school can facilitate links between families and the community to ensure that families' needs are met. For example, many families have strong church ties and school staff can work with local clergy to strengthen family involvement through the church. Schools can set up programs with local merchants to offer discounts that families can earn through involvement with the school (Duncan, 2002). Schools can collaborate with community agencies to provide families with (Stillwell and Ferguson, 2004):

- parent education;
- family counseling services and support groups;
- legal support concerning custody and guardianship issues;

- affordable housing;
  - health care and other social services;
  - financial guidance regarding bill consolidation, bankruptcy, and fiscal planning; and
  - assistance with income tax preparation.
- Continue family involvement programs at the middle and senior high school levels. Research shows that the number and strength of family-school partnerships decreases with each grade level, with the most dramatic decrease at the point of transition into middle school (Billig, 2001). At the secondary level, students have a greater sense of autonomy and often reject parents' help. As the curriculum becomes more advanced, parents are less equipped to work with their children at home. Volunteering in the classroom and on field trips is one of the most popular forms of involvement for family members of elementary school students, but is no longer appropriate at the middle and senior high school levels (Baker, 2000). At the secondary level, however, family members are needed to serve as mentors, coaches, and tutors as students' skills, interests, and talents become more diverse (Drake, 2000).

Family involvement is often invisible at the middle and senior high school levels, but physical absence from the school is not a reliable indicator of the extent to which parents are involved. At the higher grade levels, family involvement tends to occur at a distance, with parents monitoring student progress, often over the telephone (Leon, 2003). Parents of secondary students read school newsletters; visit the school when the school invites them to speak with their children's teachers; check report cards; monitor homework; and attend sports, musicals and other events their children are involved in. These parents report interest in attending sessions that provide them with information so they can help their children adjust to new schools and workshops to learn about postsecondary educational opportunities and financial planning (Leon, 2003).

- Regularly assess the effectiveness of the program. Ongoing program evaluation must be included in any family involvement program to determine its effectiveness. The American Association of School Administrators (1998) recommends the following indicators be considered in schools' annual evaluations:
  - Make sure schools are asking families what their needs are, how they want to be involved, and how satisfied they are with their involvement.
  - Determine if families are getting the types of information they need (for example, information about learning goals and expectations for their children; how children are doing in school; how families can be involved; and what resources and assistance are available to families).
  - Track types and levels of family involvement at the school.
  - Get feedback from the principal, teachers, and other staff on their family involvement experiences and on which components of the program worked and which interfered with the program's success. Determine if staff felt prepared to work with families and had the resources they needed.

In addition to the strategies outlined above, a review of the literature has found the following general suggestions on ways to increase family involvement (Metropolitan St. Louis, 2004; Shurr, 1992; Fredericks and Rasinski, 1990):

- Flood families with information.
- Make family involvement programs are a schoolwide effort.

- Involve students in recruiting their families.
- Conduct participatory projects that include the entire family.
- Use the telephone as an instrument of good news.
- Operate a parent hotline.
- Provide food at meetings and events.
- Use community members to endorse the program.
- Videotape programs for family members who could not attend.
- Develop a parent handbook of guidelines and tips.
- Hold a weekend or evening public information fair.
- Have a parent and student exchange day.
- Award extra academic credit for family involvement.
- Help parents learn to read so they can read with their children.
- Send frequent letters to tell parents what subjects teachers plan to cover, what skills they hope to teach, and how parents can help at home.
- Use gathering places like churches and community centers to spread school information.

### The Role of the Principal

It is the responsibility of the principal to foster strong partnerships between families, teachers, and students. Actions that principals can take to promote these partnerships include:

- Let teachers, staff, parents, and the community know that yours is a partnership school. Provide leadership that creates a climate where all school staff understand that families are important and that they must be respectful and supportive of them. Develop a strong partnership by encouraging family participation and providing a welcoming school climate (Blank et al., 2004; Epstein and Jansorn, 2004).
- Express a vision that addresses what you believe about family-school relationships, what you expect staff to do for and with parents, what you expect parents to do for and with staff, and how families will be involved in the day-to-day aspects of their children's education. Periodic reports should be provided to faculty, parent organizations, local media, and community groups on partnership plans and accomplishments (Epstein and Jansorn, 2004; Giba, 1999).
- Provide opportunities for families to speak directly with school leadership and teachers so they receive information about the school and their children's educational progress directly. Forums for communication include presentations, roundtable discussions, and parent grade level lunches (Giba, 1999).
- Build networks for families and teachers by bringing them together in atypical settings. When families, teachers, and community members gather and network together, they are more likely to develop different and stronger relationships with each other (Giba, 1999).
- Let all students know frequently how important their families are to the school and to students' progress and success. The way in which the principal interacts with students and the things children tell their families about the principal can greatly affect families' perceptions and their relationships with the school (Epstein and Jansorn, 2004; Giba, 1999).
- Work with other principals and district administrators to arrange professional development, share ideas, solve problems, and improve community partnerships (Blank et al., 2004).

## Biggest Mistakes Made By Schools When Implementing Family Involvement Programs

Wherry (2003) has identified the biggest mistakes school staff make when implementing family involvement programs.

- Writing off parents as uninterested because they don't show up at school despite being invited over and over again. Studies show that virtually all parents care about their children's education. They'll get involved if they recognize their participation is valued, invitations are sincere, and the school respects what they do to help their children. Work with staff to convey these key messages to parents.
- Thinking of the principal as the main parent involvement person at the school. The principal's role is critical, but he or she can't do everything. All school employees can contribute and implement ideas. Consider the entire school staff the family involvement team.
- Measuring involvement by the number of family members participating in school activities. Family involvement shouldn't be thought of as something that only happens when family members are in the school building. Most involvement happens at home. Provide family members with suggestions about how they can be involved, both at school and at home.
- Making general rather than specific requests of family members. Tell family members exactly what you want them to do. For example, telling family members to encourage children to read is not as effective as telling them to "spend at least 10 minutes every day reading with your child."
- Undervaluing the knowledge parents have about their children. Parents and family members know their children better than anyone else. Give them opportunities to share their insights.
- Waiting until the problem is really out of control before contacting parents. Principals should model early contact with parents and encourage teachers to follow their lead. Friendly exchanges with parents at the beginning of the school year build the foundation for discussing problems later.
- Failing to reach all family members who have responsibility for the child. Many children have large extended families who provide them with educational support. Design involvement programs to enlist the support of all caretakers.
- Scheduling most events at the same time of day, particularly during school hours. Make important events accessible to all family members by varying schedules and locations, offering transportation and childcare, and asking volunteers to provide summaries or recordings to those who were unable to attend.
- Asking family members for input but not really expecting to get it or act on it. Show family members that you appreciate and use their advice and express confidence that they will make valuable suggestions.
- Communicating with families only via print materials sent home with students. Mass media, such as newsletters and memos, are best for providing information to families, but only

reinforce attitudes that already exist. Face-to-face contact, such as conferences, workshops, home and classroom visits, and open houses, create and change attitudes.

### Online Resources

Much information on family involvement programs can be found online. Following are some selected resources (Epstein and Jansorn, 2004; Parent Involvement Information Folio, 2004):

- Education World ([www.education-world.com/a\\_special/parent\\_involvement.shtml](http://www.education-world.com/a_special/parent_involvement.shtml)): Education World is an online resource that provides educators with lesson plans, research materials, and news about school issues, professional development, and technology integration. This special theme page offers links to parental involvement strategies that have worked at schools throughout the United States.
- Educational Policy Institute ([www.educationpolicy.org/EPIseries/parent-bklt.htm](http://www.educationpolicy.org/EPIseries/parent-bklt.htm)): This Web site provides direct access to the Education Policy Institute's policy paper entitled *Teacher Unions and Parent Involvement*. The paper provides current position responses from organizations such as the National Education Association (NEA) and the American Federation of Teachers (AFT).
- Family Involvement Network of Educators ([www.finenetwork.org](http://www.finenetwork.org)): The Web site of the Family Involvement Network of Educators (FINE) at the Harvard Graduate School of Education provides research topics, summaries, and publications on school, family, and community partnerships and after school programs.
- Institute for Responsive Education ([www.responsiveeducation.org](http://www.responsiveeducation.org)): The Institute for Responsive Education (IRE) at Northeastern University provides project summaries, publications, services, and related Web sites on school, family, and community partnerships.
- National Center for Education Statistics ([www.nces.ed.gov/pubsearch/pubsinfo.asp?pubid=98032](http://www.nces.ed.gov/pubsearch/pubsinfo.asp?pubid=98032)): This Web site provides access to the National Center for Education Statistics' *Parent Involvement in Children's Education: Efforts by Public Elementary Schools* report. The report presents findings from the *Survey on Family and School Partnerships in Public Schools, K-8* and discusses school-sponsored activities to promote parent involvement and strategies for involving parents in children's learning.
- National Institute for Urban School Improvement ([www.inclusiveschools.org/publications/family\\_school.htm](http://www.inclusiveschools.org/publications/family_school.htm)): This Web site provides information on the National Institute for Urban School Improvement's Family Linkages Project and includes publications on family involvement, school case accounts, and activities for engaging families.
- National Network of Partnership Schools ([www.partnershipschools.org](http://www.partnershipschools.org)): The National Network of Partnership Schools at Johns Hopkins University's Web site provides professional development materials on school, family, and community partnerships; research briefs; collections of promising practices from schools, districts, and states; and descriptions of award-winning partnership programs.
- Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory ([www.nwrel.org/comm/topics/parent.html](http://www.nwrel.org/comm/topics/parent.html)): The Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory (NWREL) is one of the nation's federally

funded educational research institutes. The Web site provides publications on research-based initiatives in parent involvement and links to other parent involvement resources.

- U.S. Department of Education ([www.ed.gov/legislation/ESEA/Title\\_I/parinv.html](http://www.ed.gov/legislation/ESEA/Title_I/parinv.html)): This U.S. Department of Education Web site offers details of existing legislation regarding parental involvement and offers information regarding parents' role in accordance with the No Child Left Behind Act.
- U.S. Department of Education ([www.ed.gov/pubs/FamInvolve/index.html](http://www.ed.gov/pubs/FamInvolve/index.html)): This U.S. Department of Education Web site provides an idea book for successful approaches to family involvement in children's education. The document describes successful practices and the schools that have instituted them and also provides a list of external resources on parent involvement programs.

### Summary

Family involvement is a strong predictor of high student achievement. Students whose families are involved in their education typically receive higher grades and test scores, complete more homework, have better attendance, and exhibit more positive attitudes and behaviors. Families can become involved in children's education in many ways, including volunteering in the classroom and on field trips, attending school activities and events, and engaging in at-home learning activities. Barriers to involvement exist for both families and school staff, such as limited time and resources and shared misperceptions by family members and school staff. Successful home-school partnerships increase involvement in students' education by actively promoting family, staff, and community participation. Strategies for implementing a successful home-school partnership include fostering a climate of mutual respect and trust, communicating with families regularly, providing training to both family members and school staff, and being respectful of diversity.

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