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FAMILY INVOLVEMENT: THE HOME-SCHOOL PARTNERSHIP

At A Glance

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 information capsule summarizes 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.

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).

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.
- Communication between schools and families.
- Volunteer opportunities.
- At-home learning activities.
- Decision-making opportunities.
- Collaborating with the community.

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 (Jones, 2001; Baker, 2000; Caplan, 2000; American Association of School Administrators, 1998; Liontos, 1992):

- Lack of teacher time.
- Teachers' misperceptions of parents' abilities.
- Lack of understanding of parents' communication styles.
- Limited family resources, such as transportation and child care.
- Parents' lack of comfort at the school.
- Tension in relationships between parents and teachers.
- Mobility.
- Lack of vested interest.
- Difficulties of involvement in the upper grades.

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.

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). Following are strategies for reducing the barriers to family involvement and implementing a successful family involvement program. (Authors responsible for the following strategies can be found in the *Literature Review on Family Involvement: The Home-School Partnership*, available from M-DCPS' Research Services.)

- Start with a needs assessment.
- Redefine parent involvement to offer a variety of non-traditional family involvement activities.
- Tailor programs to schools' specific needs.
- Clarify how parents can be involved in their children's education.
- Use every opportunity to promote family involvement.
- Foster a climate of mutual respect and trust.
- Be respectful of diversity.
- Welcome families into the school.
- Engage in two-way, regular communication with families.
- Emphasize the parent-child relationship.
- Provide training programs for family members.
- Provide training for school staff to help them learn how to work with families.
- Provide staff with the time needed to work with families.
- Recognize and reward family involvement.

- Recruit community stakeholders as partners.
- Continue family involvement programs at the middle and senior high school levels.
- Regularly assess the effectiveness of the program.

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 (Blank, 2004; Epstein and Jansorn, 2004; Giba, 1999):

- 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.

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.

Additional Information

For a detailed discussion of this issue, a description of related online resources, and a listing of references, please refer to the complete report, *Literature Review on Family Involvement: The Home-School Partnership*, available from Miami-Dade County Public Schools’ Research Services by calling (305) 995-7503.