Parental Involvement: A Research Brief for Practitioners
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Introduction

Practitioners and policy makers alike intuitively accept the importance of parental involvement in schools; however, knowing how to meaningfully engage parents for the benefit of all children is less understood. School administrators and teachers face challenges related to reaching all parents in positive ways, implementing strategies that will result in improved student achievement, and balancing the needs of parents vis-à-vis educators' professional autonomy.

When parents participate in their children's schooling, students may experience more academic and social success. Epstein (2001) suggests that parents who are informed and involved in their children's school can positively impact their child's attitude and performance. Parents' awareness and interest in their children's learning and school activities models for their children the importance of school, which may lead to positive behaviors. Importantly, Epstein's research shows that parental involvement can have a positive impact on student's academic work at all grade levels.

Drawing a causal link between parental involvement and student achievement is challenging; much of the research on parent involvement and student performance is therefore correlational (Scott Stein & Thorkildsen, 1999). Although the impact of parental involvement is dependent on a number of contextual variables, there are many advantages attributed to parental involvement.

This literature review attempts to address the following questions:

1. What factors contribute to parents being involved in or disengaged from their children's school?
2. What impact does parental involvement have on student performance?
3. What types of parent involvement might produce positive outcomes?

What The Research Says

Epstein, Sanders, Simon, Salinas, Jansorn, and Van Voorhis (2002) draw three key conclusions about parental involvement. First, parental involvement tends to decline across the grades unless schools make conscious efforts to develop and implement partnerships with parents. Reasons for this declining pattern include parents' lack of familiarity with curriculum at the higher grades; adolescents' preferences to have their parents stay involved in less visible ways; parents' decisions to return to the work force once their children gain more independence; and secondary teachers' lack of awareness of how to effectively involve parents at the higher levels. Second, affluent parents tend to be involved in school more often and in positive ways, whereas economically distressed parents have limited contact with schools, and usually in situations dealing with students' achievement or behavior. Schools that work on building relationships with all parents, however, can equalize the involvement of all socioeconomic groups. Finally, single parents, employed parents, fathers, and parents who live far from the school, on average, are less involved in the school unless the school organizes opportunities that consider these parents' needs and circumstances. Although these patterns are generally observable among schools, they can be overcome if schools develop programs that include families that otherwise would not become involved on their own.

The degree and nature of impact on student achievement is somewhat debated in the literature. Fan and Chen's (2001) meta-analysis of the literature concerning the connection between parental involvement and students' academic achievement suggests a "moderate to practically meaningful" relationship. The relationship seems to be more general than specific, indicating that parental involvement has an overall effect on students' success, rather than a direct effect on any particular subject area. Their research finds parents' expectations and dreams for their children's academic achievement are the strongest factor influencing students' school performance. Bastiani (2000) echoes a similar challenge by raising the question of identifying a clear connection between parents' contributions and student progress.

Despite the ambiguity in measuring the academic impact of parental involvement, various in-depth studies have established a relationship. Henderson and Berla (1994) synthesized over sixty studies regarding the effects of family involvement on student achievement. Their work attributes to parental involvement effects that include higher grades and test scores, increased homework completion, improved school attendance, more positive attitudes, fewer discipline problems, increased high school completion rates, decreased school leaving rates, and greater participation in postsecondary education. Importantly, like Epstein, Henderson and Berla suggest parents' involvement can contribute to these outcomes from early childhood through high school.

Studies conducted among specific grades and subject areas support the contention that parental involvement can influence students' academic achievement regardless of the student's age or subject. For example, Stegelin (2003), Wirtz & Schumacher (2003), and Hertz-Lazarowitz & Horovitz (2002) focused on early childhood education and literacy, noting a link between families who engage in literacy activities at home and their children's success with reading and writing. Strategies such as reading with the child, discussing stories, and creating a book-friendly environment contribute to the development of children's literacy skills and positive attitudes toward reading.

Teachers' attitudes toward involving parents influence the extent to which parents are involved in their children's school. A report by West (2000) discusses an elementary teacher's efforts to increase parent-teacher communication, and its effect on students' success in reading. Findings from this study show that parent-teacher communication can motivate students to complete reading homework, which results in better quiz and test scores. This particular report demonstrates the importance of teachers initiating positive contact with parents, and the potential effect it can have on students' achievement in school.

Studies of the middle and secondary grades reflect the above findings. It is recognized that adolescents both desire and require more independence. Van Voorhis (2001) and Simon (2001) found that regardless of students' background or prior school achievement, involving parents in various ways had a positive impact on achievement, attendance, behavior, and course credits completed. Significantly, parental guidance and support of their adolescent students is critical to secondary students' school and future success (Sanders & Epstein, 2000).

Although parental involvement has reached a higher level of acceptance today as a key factor in improving schools, "acceptance does not always translate into implementation, commitment, or creativity" (Drake, 2000, p. 34). Central to this challenge is educators' and administrators' uncertainty about initiating and maintaining involvement that is meaningful and mutually beneficial for the school, the family, and the student.

The most promising practices involving parents seem to be those that embrace collaboration among teachers, parents, and students. Fundamental to this type of cooperation is a shared definition of "meaningful parental involvement." There is evidence of disjuncture between professionals' and parents' understanding of partnership. Fine (1993) for example, claims a hierarchical relationship between teachers and parents prevails, such that professionals may assume parents regard their position as equally influential, but parents themselves defer to professionals' expertise. Beck and Murphy (1999) agree that although schools set up structures, such as school councils or collaborative teams, decision-making

ultimately rests in the professionals who possess specialized knowledge inaccessible to most parents. They further contend that organizational changes such as site-based decision-making that attempts to include parents have the least positive effect on parents of minority groups. Researching the effects of parent involvement practices on student achievement in American schools under the *No Child Left Behind Act,* D.Agostino, Hedges, Wong, and Borman (2001) also found that programs which attempt to involve parents at the school through school-sponsored activities or governance structures have a negligible impact on student achievement. Rather, parent programs that provide resources and assistance that parents may use with their children at home are more likely to have an effect on students' academic progress.

Gewirtz, Bowe, and Ball's (1995) study of school choice in Britain is important when considering diversity among parents. The school choice movement assumes a monolithic parent group; the idea that parents can and will respond similarly to opportunities to make decisions for their children, or participate in their children's schools is, in fact, erroneous. Their study highlighted that inequalities in social and economic capital influence parents' level of participation and ability to advocate for their children. Specifically, middle to upper income parents capitalize on opportunities to influence their children's schooling, whereas lower income parents are disadvantaged because of circumstance or skill. Crozier's (2000) qualitative study of parents, teachers, and students reinforces that "central to understanding the nature of the parent-school relationship and the influences upon it is the issue of social-class" (p. xv). Together, Fine, Beck and Murphy, Gewirtz, Bowe, and Ball, and Crozier point to the importance of dialogue between schools and families to identify encouraging and meaningful ways to engage all parents for the benefit of all children.

Many studies have documented the importance of parental involvement in children's homework. Callahan, Rademacher, and Hildreth (1998) find that parents' involvement with at-risk sixth and seventh grade students improved students' homework performance. Central to this success, however, is the school's development of training programs for parents which aim to provide parents with strategies for assisting and supporting their children at home. There is some indication in the research that diverse educational backgrounds influence the nature and frequency of parents helping their children with homework assignments. Balli, Demo, and Wedman (1998) report that when teachers prompt parents to become involved with math homework, parent involvement significantly increases. Importantly, this study shows that two-parent families are more likely to help with homework than single-parent families. Home circumstances and family structures are therefore necessary considerations for schools aiming to increase the level of parental involvement with homework.

Greene, Tichener, and Mercedes (2003) offer specific strategies for parents to participate in schools. Suggestions include individual activities with children, setting up homework space and routine, discussing needed resources for home supervision with teachers, or reflecting on one's own assumptions about school. Volunteering in the school and the community are other positive ways that parents can become involved, and on their own terms.

Although certain types of parent involvement such as discussions about homework and school-related topics have positive effects on homework completion, there is research that contradicts this finding. Cooper, Lindsay, and Nye (2000) suggest that parenting style plays a part in the effectiveness of parents' involvement in their children's homework. In their survey of over 700 parents of elementary, middle, and high school students, two-thirds of parents reported helping their children with homework was negative or inappropriate. Specifically, in some cases parents helped their children with homework in order to have them finish it faster, and in other cases parents made homework completion more difficult for the student. These findings speak to the importance of school-home discussions that will encourage interactions that support student learning.

Epstein's (2001) research offers a comprehensive parent involvement program, and is perhaps the most frequently cited in this area of scholarship. Epstein's typology suggests effective parent involvement programs focus on:

1. parenting skills to assist parents with understanding their children's learning needs, and helping teachers understand family needs;
2. communication that allows for two-way, open communication between the school and home;
3. volunteering that recognizes parents' talents and contributions both in and for the school;
4. learning at home strategies that engage the family with their children's school work;
5. decision making that includes parents as key stakeholders in making decisions that will impact student learning; and
6. collaborating with the community to create mutual benefit by sharing resources and contributing to both school and community goals.

Comprehensive parent programs will incorporate the six keys into an action plan that is developed and implemented by an Action Team of parents, teachers, students, administration, and community members. Epstein emphasizes the need for grassroots planning involving all stakeholders. In her conceptualization, parents, teachers, and community members are coined "spheres of influence"; all stakeholders are considered equal partners in student learning.

Although Epstein's typologies are considered practical and effective, there are other models that attempt to formalize parental involvement. Lunenberg and Irby (2002) summarize seven other models of parent involvement alongside Epstein's school-home-community partnership model including: (1) Gordon's systems approach; (2) the Systems Development Corporation study; (3) Berger's role categories; (4) Chavkin and Williams' parent involvement role; (5) Honig's early childhood education model; (6) Jones' levels of parent involvement; and (7) language minority parents involvement approach. Their paper further suggests developing a family partnership center, establishing parent centers or cooperatives, and creating new options for parents as potential strategies for successfully engaging parents.

At the heart of parental involvement seems to be open and effective communication. Much research is devoted to helping teachers and parents establish positive relationships. Swick (2003) examines the role of culture in the communication process, and emphasizes cultural differences as a means to strengthen relationships. Sharing information, empowering parents, dismantling barriers to understanding and cooperation, and recognizing parents' strengths, priorities, and perspectives is fundamental to building strong relationships between the home and the school. Part of this process implies a responsibility on the part of teachers to learn about their students' families. Goodwin and King (2002) have produced a booklet entitled Culturally Responsive Parental Involvement: Concrete Understandings and Basic Strategies, which explores teachers' culturally biased beliefs. Helpful concepts explored in this document include the myths about parents who do not visit school as being unconcerned, how to meet culturally diverse needs, and culturally sensitive strategies for involving parents.

There are many concrete strategies for involving parents in schools discussed in the literature. Common to this corpus, however, is the need for schools to gauge their contexts in order to meet the needs of those they serve.

Key Findings

1. Parent involvement can have an impact on student learning throughout all grades. Although involvement in high school tends to decrease, students' study habits, behavior, and attitude toward school can be influenced by parents' interest even in the final year of school.

2. "Meaningful parental involvement" is a term that requires dialogue among teachers and parents. The definition of partnership is equally unclear.

3. Culture, socioeconomic background, and family characteristics influence the degree of parental involvement, and ultimately the impact it has on student achievement. Minority cultures, lower income families, and single-parent households are less involved in their children's school compared

to white, middle class families. The latter group's involvement tends to have the greatest impact on student achievement.

4. Parental involvement at home seems to have a more significant impact on children than parental involvement in school activities.

5. Helping with homework is a common strategy schools employ to engage parents. Schools must be cognizant of parents' need for guidance and assistance in order to be effectively involved in this regard.

6. Principles of mutual respect and trust are foundational to establishing effective partnership programs. Schools that successfully involve parents:
    a. create a welcoming environment
    b. use frequent and various communication methods
    c. involve parents in decisions that affect their child
    d. make an attempt to learn about parents' strengths, skills, talents, and experiences
    e. provide strategies and resources for parents to support their children's learning
    f. initiate the process of building relationships with parents
    g. have leaders that believe in parents as partners in their children's learning

7. Professional development for teachers about promoting effective parental involvement in children's education is not only helpful, but necessary. It cannot be assumed that teachers are comfortable working with parents, know how to promote effective parental involvement, and possess the skills to interact with parents in ways that are mutually beneficial.

Suggestions for Teachers

1. Help parents understand why they are so important to their children's school success.

2. Give parents specific things they can do to be involved.

3. Take time to assess current practices in your school before embarking on a program for parental involvement. Assess what is working well for the school as a whole and what is working well for particular grades. Determine what to continue and what new initiatives to try.

4. Develop a long term plan that includes evaluation of your success.

5. Look at parental involvement as having results for students, for parents and for teachers.

6. Epstein suggests six types of involvement: parenting, communicating, volunteering, learning at home, decision making, and collaboration with the community.

7. Each school year, provide parents with the opportunity to learn how to support, encourage and help their student at home.

8. Communicate to parents what their student will be learning in each subject.

9. Be respectful of family time and the diversity of families.

10. Encourage parents to provide input on policies that affect the education of their children.

11. Development of an effective partnership with parents is an incremental process not an event.

12. Parent/teacher/student conferences or student-led conferences can be effective mechanisms for increasing parent knowledge of curriculum and supporting their student at home.

Additional Readings for AISI Coordinators and Teachers

ERIC Resources

Ellis, D. & Hughes, K. *Partnerships by design: Cultivating effective and meaningful school-family-community partnerships.* Creating Communities of Learning & Excellence. ERIC Document No. ED472442.

> This workbook was written to complement the training manual "Planning for Youth Success" (Dorfman and others, 2001). That manual outlines how family and community members can work with school staff and students to set standards for student success. This workbook lays a foundation for building partnerships to help facilitate that process. It is based on the assumption that many educators have sought ways to actively involve families but have not gotten the results they desired. Its purpose is to help educators build more effective and meaningful school-family-community partnerships within their schools, programs, or classrooms. It is designed to be a practical tool for facilitating the planning process; specifically to assist partnership-development teams in creating school or program partnership plans. The workbook can also be used as a self-directed study guide. It contains sample forms, sample plans, worksheets, checklists, and activities. It also contains "ideas for action," which are hints, tips, and practical suggestions for putting plans into action.

Norton, M.S. & Nufeld, J.C. (2002). *Parental involvement in schools: Why it is important and how to get it.* ERIC Journal No. EJ674617.

> Discusses why parent involvement is important for student achievement. Provides several recommendations for the implementation of an effective parent involvement program in schools, including early and ongoing assessment of program effectiveness.

Philipsen, M. (Ed.), (1997). *Parent involvement in the schools: Ideas that work.* ERIC Document No. ED466824.

> This collection of 29 articles is devoted to the question of "what works" in regard to parental involvement. The two main objectives in compiling this volume were: (1) to provide general information about successful strategies and programs to interested educators and parents; and (2) to offer context-specific, "tailored" suggestions to diverse groups of people concerned about parental involvement. Chapter 1 offers a general overview of what works when it comes to parental involvement in school. Chapter 2 focuses on the middle and secondary levels, based on the rationale that it is at these levels of schooling where parental involvement frequently declines and is most difficult to foster and/or maintain. Chapter 3 is dedicated to diverse groups of students, parents, and communities, providing examples of successful programs for urban parents, parents of at-risk students, and parents of diverse ethnic, racial, and linguistic backgrounds. Chapter 4 represents a mixture of writings related to "specialty themes" ranging from how communications technology can be used for the purpose of improving parental involvement in school to the question of how to combine seemingly contradictory goals, such as teacher empowerment and parental involvement in school.

Solomon, R. Nichols & Rhodes, A. (2001). *Strong images and practical ideas: A guide to parent engagement in school reform.* ERIC Document No. ED466521.

> This guide helps leaders working with parents and the community learn about promising practices in parent and community involvement in school reform. By examining the efforts of seven contrasting groups working with parents nationwide, the guide depicts the many forms that parent and community involvement in schools can take, highlighting opportunities for and barriers to meaningful parent participation. It is designed to help leaders consider how these seven groups might offer support or technical assistance in their own work to engage parents and communities in schools and school reform. The guide begins with organizational profiles of the seven groups (mission, overall work, work with parents and communities, and technical assistance available). The next section discusses the profiles, noting lessons learned and barriers to participation. The next section examines the types of guidance and assistance the seven groups may be able to provide to people just starting out, offering two tools for identifying the technical assistance provider that best meets their needs (a technical assistance chart and a chart of important questions to consider before seeking technical assistance). The guide ends with a list of contact information for the seven groups and a glossary of relevant terms.

White, L.J. (1998, Jan/Feb). National PTA standards for parent/family involvement programs. *High School Magazine*, 5, 8-12.

> This article explores the American parent organization of the PTA, outlining its standards for involving parents. Practical strategies are outlined in this article.

Williams, A. (2002). Putting parent engagement into action: A practical guide. ERIC Document No. ED466298.

> Recognizing that social service agencies need to work in partnership with families for children's safety and well-being, this booklet addresses some common barriers faced by local, state, and national attempts at parent engagement by describing practical strategies for successful shared leadership. From examples of how incremental changes in community-based organizations result in large-scale community improvement and policy reform, this booklet distills recommendations, providing concrete ways to bring about increased meaningful participation of parents in advocating for their children. The booklet focuses on systemic change, emphasizing the importance of the committed advocacy of family support programs. The booklet is presented in two parts. Part 1 provides recommendations for community-based programs and neighborhood initiatives and presents strategies developed by professionals and parents working at that level. Strategies include raising consciousness and building commitment, removing practical barriers, recognizing contributions and providing incentives, changing organizational processes, building on culture as a strength, tailoring strategies to specific populations, and helping parents build skills. Part 2 provides recommendations for state and national efforts. Strategies include involving parents in all activities, ensuring parents' input on decision-making boards, providing economic compensation, developing an action-oriented agenda, developing policy to support parent engagement, communicating supportively, and reaching out to natural leaders. In both parts, recommendations are illustrated with examples of how the strategies have been carried out by others. The booklet's three appendices list the strategies, present a timeline of parent engagement developments at Family Support America, and list parent engagement resources.

Journal Articles and Books

Balli, S.J. (1998). When mom and dad help: Student reflections on parent involvement with homework. *Journal of Research and Development in Education*, *31*(3), 142-46.

This study of 67 sixth grade students examined their perceptions about parents helping with homework assignments. Results indicated that a significant number of students believed their success was increased with help from their parents; however, students reported mixed perceptions about the experience of working with their parents on homework assignments.

Buttery, T.J., & Anderson, P.J. (1999, Fall). Community, school, and parent dynamics: A synthesis of literature and activities. *Teacher Education Quarterly 26*(4), 111-122.

This article looks at contextual variables that impact relationships between teachers and parents. It also explores the research on parental involvement, and reviews best practices.

Christenson, S.L., & Sheridan, S.M. (2001). *Schools and families: Creating essential `connections for learning*. New York: Guilford Press.

A section of this book summarizes research in the area of parent involvement in children's learning. The authors contend that the literature supports their conclusions that "families are essential, not just desirable" to the educational success of their children. They recommend an approach to family involvement that: 1) focuses on relationships; 2) recognizes collaboration is an attitude, not activity; 3) creates a vehicle to look at the bigger picture about student learning; 4) shares information and resources; and 5) establishes meaningful roles for all partners.

Epstein, J. (1995). School/family/community partnerships: Caring for the children we share. *Phi Delta Kappan*, 701-712.

This article is a brief overview of Epstein's typology for school-home-community partnerships. The article discusses her concept of spheres of influence, as well as some of the research implications for involving parents in their children's learning. Additionally, this article provides challenges, strategies, and redefinitions for each of the six keys to involvement

Eulina, M., & de Carvalho, P. (2001). *Rethinking family-school relations: A critique of parental involvement in schooling*. Mahwah, NH: Laurence Erlbaum Associates.

This book takes a critical look at parental involvement in school. It finds that culture, socioeconomic background, and ethnicity contribute to the degree to which parents become involved. Additionally, this book suggests that discrepant power relations emerging from traditional hierarchical relations between parents and teachers make parental involvement strategies and programs challenging.

Finn, J.D. (1998). Parental engagement that makes a difference. *Educational Leadership*, 55(8), 20-24.

This article analyzes how specific parenting practices, both at home and at school, relate to student achievement. Studies cited by the author indicate that parent involvement at home influences academic performance more strongly than parent involvement at school. Three types of parent involvement at home are consistently related to school achievement: 1) organizing and monitoring children's time, especially related to television viewing; 2) helping with homework; and 3) discussing school-related issues with children. Research has not found a consistent relationship between parental involvement in school (attending school activities, volunteering, and helping in the classroom) and student achievement.

Hoover-Dempsey, K.V., Battaito, A.C., Walker, J.M.T., Reed, R.P., DeJong, J.M., & Jones, K.P. (2001). Parental involvement in homework. *Educational Psychologist, 36*(3), 195-209.

This article reviews research on parent involvement in homework specifically related to parents' motivation to become involved in their children's homework, activities and strategies used in the involvement, and student outcomes associated with this involvement. The literature also suggests that parents' modeling and reinforcement influence student outcomes.

Mapp, K.L. (1997, December). Making family-school connections work. *Education Digest*, *63*, 36-39.

This study of family-involvement programs at an elementary school in Boston, MA involved interviews with 20 families from "economically distressed circumstances." Two themes emerged from the study that are key to parent involvement at this school: 1) school community members connect with parents through activities and programs that are welcoming and that help families build a trusting relationship with the school, and feel that they are a part of the school community; and 2) staff members work to honor families by validating any level of involvement or contributions they make.

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