Parent Involvement

Increasing Parent Involvement

- **Parenting**
  o Communicate concern for families
  o Sponsor parent workshops
  o Develop resource library on parenting
- **Learning at Home**
  o Encourage parents to read to child
  o Encourage parent to help with homework
  o Develop homework workshops
- **Communication**
  o Parent-teacher conferences
  o Home notes/newsletters/parent hotline
  o Initiate contact early in school year
- **Volunteering**
  o Assist in classroom/cafeteria/library
  o Organize school activity
  o Invite on field trips/presentations
- **Decision-Making**
  o Encourage PTO participation
  o Serve on curriculum/activity committees
  o Serve on district/state level committees
- **Collaborating With Community**
  o Provide parents information on community resources
  o Involve business leaders

Resources

Council for Educational Development and Research, 1201 - 16th Street N.W., Washington, D.C. 20036; 202-223-1593; http://www.wested.org/.

The Home and School Institute (HSI), Special Projects Office, 1201 - 16th Street N.W., Washington, D.C. 20036; 202-466-3633; http://www.megaskillshsi.org/Default.htm.

National Association of Partners in Education, 209 Madison Street, Suite 401, Alexandria, VA 22314; 703-836-4880; http://www.partnersineducation.org/.

Jordan, C., Orozco, E. & Averett, A. (2001). **Emerging Issues in School, Family & Community Connections, Annual Synthesis, 2001.** National Center for family & Community Connections with Schools, Southwest Educational Development Laboratory, 211 East Seventh Street, Austin, TX 78701-3281; 800-476-6861; e-mail: connections@sedl.org; http://www.sedl.org/connections.

Seeking solutions to questions left unanswered in the wake of recent school shootings, many schools have begun to look for ways to strengthen the home-school bond. Parent involvement promotes a healthy and consistent learning environment by establishing mutual goals between parents and educators, and by developing activities that bridge home and school (Christenson, 1995; Weiss & Edwards, 1992). Parent involvement programs actively engage parents through a variety of activities that enable them to more fully participate in their children's education both at home and at school.

What is Parent Involvement?

Family-school collaboration is a cooperative process of planning that brings together school staff, parents, children, and community members to maximize resources for child achievement and development. Although connections between parent involvement and school violence have rarely been studied, increased parent involvement can result in home environments that are more conducive to learning and improve communication and consistency between home and school. These changes can lead to safer, more responsive schools.

Parent involvement experts have identified six ways that schools can promote parent involvement in learning (Epstein, 1992; Smith, 1994; Ban, 1993; Williamson, 1997). The first three take place in the home setting. Schools can help parents increase involvement by teaching them better child-rearing skills through *parenting* components. One New Jersey middle school taught parents to use home-school contracts to better manage their children's inappropriate behavior (Smith, 1994). Schools may also assist parents by stressing *learning at home*. In the Parents Assuring Student Success (PASS) program, parents learn how to supplement schoolwork by instructing their children at home in academic tasks such as reading and time management. Third, all parent involvement programs include an element of increased *communication*. The Parents As Teachers of Children (PATCH) program, for example, provides numerous support contacts for both parents and staff, and sponsors regular staff training and supervised meetings during which concerns can be addressed.

The next three areas of parent involvement occur in the school setting. Providing opportunities for *volunteering* can increase parental involvement in school activities. New Haven's School Development Program developed a Parent Program team to promote parent volunteers in social activities, as classroom aides, and as members of the school development committee (Haynes & Comer, 1996; Warner, 1991; Lloyd, 1996). Parents may also develop a higher degree of ownership in programs that include a component of *decision making*. The Parents in Touch program in the Indianapolis Public Schools, for example, involves parents in planning the academic curriculum. Finally, *collaborating with community* components utilize community resources to strengthen school programs. The Utah Center for Families in Education, a community center developed specifically to meet the needs of school-aged children and their families, is run jointly by state officials, school administrators, school families, and members of the community.

What Do We Know About Parent Involvement?

Traditionally, parent involvement roles have been limited to activities such as Parent Teacher Organization (PTO) meetings and parent-teacher conferences. More recently, the Goals 2000 Educate America Act (1994) and No Child Left Behind Act (2002) have called for more challenging academic standards, as well as an increase in parent participation and parent involvement programs. Schools that seek to implement parent involvement programs should build them based on the unique needs of their own community.

Parent involvement has been positively associated with student academic success, higher attendance rates, and lower suspension rates. At one Iowa high school, attendance

was increased by improving communication with parents about stricter attendance rules and involving parents in the implementation process (Kube & Ratigan, 1991). Increased parent involvement has also been shown to lead to greater teacher satisfaction, improved parent understanding and parent-child communication, and more successful and effective school programs.

Some programs have been directed at parents of students with challenging behavior. For example, one elementary school in California required parents of students at risk for expulsion to attend regular meetings to develop a solution regarding their child's behavior. The collaborative team approach used in these meetings was rated as highly successful by both parents and teachers (Morrison, Olivos, Dominguez, Gomez, & Lena, 1993). Parent Management Training (PMT), teaching parents effective methods of behavior management to decrease their children's aggressive behavior, has also been used with families of students exhibiting aggressive or disruptive behavior.

Making Parent Involvement Work

Make a School-wide Commitment. For whatever reason, extensive parent involvement has not been the norm in most schools. More important than any specific strategy, may be a school-wide commitment to build strong home-school ties. Making a commitment that parents *will* be involved to a greater extent increases the likelihood of finding strategies that will increase parent participation.

Use a Strength-, Not a Deficit-Based Approach. Especially in dealing with the families of students who may be at-risk, there is a tendency to focus on the family "dysfunction" that may be contributing to the child's problems. Many parents receive only negative contacts about their child from the school. Yet all families have strengths, and collaborative relationships are best built by focusing on those. How can we build upon shared concerns to help students? What positive aspects of the family can provide a resource to the school for assisting troubled youth? One simple strategy for increasing trust is to begin to communicate to parents when their child does something positive in the school or classroom.

Be Responsive to Family and Community Needs. Often it seems that those families we most wish to see involved in school will be the most difficult to get involved. Yet the chances of successfully bringing parents in to school can be greatly increased by making activities and meetings responsive to the needs of families. Are meetings scheduled at times when parents can attend? Is there childcare or other provision for families who have younger siblings? Are meetings free of professional jargon that may be unfamiliar to parents? Are there community resources that can assist us in reaching more parents? Some communities that have been frustrated in their attempts to involve parents have successfully reached parents by going through community churches.

Access, Voice, Ownership. Advocates of parent-friendly approaches argue that parents seek access, voice, and ownership in decisions involving their children. Have parents had appropriate access to important decisions regarding their children? Have we as a school ensured that parents have a voice in the education of their sons and daughters? Finally, effective parent involvement means that parents are not simply informed of the results of school decision-making, but have real opportunities to participate and take ownership in decisions affecting schooling.

Conclusion

Parent involvement provides an important opportunity for schools to enrich current school programs by bringing parents into the educational process. Increased parent involvement has been shown to result in increased student success, increased parent and teacher satisfaction, and improved school climate. Schools can encourage involvement in a number of areas including parenting, learning at home, communication, volunteering, decision-making, and community collaboration. Effective parent involvement programs are built upon a careful consideration of the unique needs of the community. In order to build trust, effective approaches to parent involvement rely upon a strength-based approach, emphasizing positive interactions. Though specifics may vary, all parent involvement programs share the goal of increasing parent-school collaboration in order to promote healthy child development and safe school communities.

Russell Skiba and Allison Strassell, February, 2002

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