

Back to school: How parent involvement affects student achievement (full report)

It may be one of the least controversial statements in American education: Parent involvement can make a difference in a child's education. Two-thirds of teachers surveyed (Public Agenda, 2003) believed that their students would perform better in school if their parents were more involved in their child's education, while 72% of parents say children of uninvolved parents sometimes "fall through the cracks" in schools (Johnson & Duffett, 2003).

The conflict can come, though, on how to create that involvement, and whether all involved feel the particular activities are worthwhile. Do all the PTA meetings, take-home flyers and Back to School nights actually generate increases in student achievement? In this short paper, the Center for Public Education examines the research on the value of a school's parent involvement activities on student outcomes.

Overview: How are parents involved in schools?

While virtually all schools promote parent involvement, there are different types of involvement, ranging from encouraging volunteering and fundraising to providing parents with home-based learning activities. Joyce Epstein of the Johns Hopkins University, Center on School, Family and Community Partnerships, one of the nation's leading experts on parent involvement, has divided school parent involvement programs into six broad categories:

1. **Parenting**, in which schools help families with their parenting skills by providing information on children's developmental stages and offering advice on learning-friendly home environments;
2. **Communicating**, or working to educate families about their child's progress and school services and providing opportunities for parents to communicate with the school;
3. **Volunteering**, which ranges from offering opportunities for parents to visit their child's school to finding ways to recruit and train them to work in the school or classroom;
4. **Learning at home**, in which schools and educators share ideas to promote at-home learning through high expectations and strategies so parents can monitor and help with homework.
5. **Decision-making**, in which schools include families as partners in school organizations, advisory panels, and similar committees.
6. **Community collaboration**, a two-way outreach strategy in which community or business groups are involved in education and schools encourage family participation in the community.

So how do parents participate? National survey data shows that attending school meetings or events is the leading form of parent participation in schools, followed by school fundraising activities. The National Center for Education Statistics' Parent and Family Involvement in Education Survey for the 2007 National Household Education Surveys Program (Herrold and O'Donnell, 2008) included these conclusions from parent responses:

- 78 percent attended a parent-teacher conference;
- 74 percent attended a class or school event;
- 65 percent participated in school fundraising;
- 86 percent said they had received information about the parents' expected role at the student's school;
- 46 percent served as a volunteer on a school committee; and
- 89 percent of those interviewed from January-May 2007 said they had attended at least one school or PTO/PTA meeting since the start of the school year.

Not surprisingly, participation was greater for parents with K-8 students than for those with high school students. At the K-8 level, 92 percent of parents reported attending a school or PTO/PTA meeting compared with 83 percent of parents of high schoolers. The gap was even more pronounced in volunteering, which was evident among 52 percent of parents of K-8 students but only 34 percent of parents with high school students.

Yet the survey found some distinct variations by race, particularly in contrasting typical "volunteer" involvement with involvement in the child's education at home. K-8 parents of white students were more likely than parents of African American or Hispanic students to attend a school event, volunteer or serve on a school committee and participate in school fundraising. However, when it came to homework, the data showed that parents of white students trailed other groups in involvement. While 82 percent of parents of white students said an adult checked their child's homework, the rates were higher among parents of African American and Hispanic students — which had rates of 94% and 91%, respectively. (The report did not specify what was involved in checking homework.)

Indeed, other studies have shown that lower-income and minority parents often have the same level of involvement in education — even though it may not necessarily be reflected at PTA meetings or school fundraisers. In a study of

standards-based reform practices by Westat and Policy Studies Associates (2001) for the U.S. Department of Education, researchers found that income level had no bearing on parent involvement in a major reform effort at Title I schools.

In summarizing findings of this study and others in a major meta-analysis, scholars at the Southwest Educational Development Laboratory (SEDL, 2002) concluded that educators and policymakers should have no pre-conceived notions about parent involvement. "Recognize that all parents, regardless of income, education or cultural background, are involved in their children's learning and want their children to do well," SEDL said.

But good intentions on either side only go so far. As noted by Epstein and Sanders (2000), "Teachers, parents, and students have little understanding of each other's interests in children and schools....Most teachers do not know the goals that parents have for their children, how parents help them learn, or how parents would like to be involved. Most parents do not know much about the educational programs in their children's school or what teachers require of them." Effective parent involvement comes when a true partnership exists between schools and families. Creating that partnership, especially around academics, is what works for student achievement. Following is what the research found about how that happens.

What really works: major study findings

The SEDL report, *A New Wave of Evidence*, synthesizes research from 51 studies over the preceding decade to reach conclusions about the effect of parent involvement on student learning. While few of the studies were experimental or quasi-experimental in design and many were correlational or case studies, when synthesized, the report had positive findings. For example, SEDL found that students with involved parents, no matter their income or background, are more likely to:

- Earn higher grades and test scores, and enroll in higher-level programs
- Be promoted, pass their classes and earn credits
- Attend school regularly
- Have better social skills, show improved behavior and adapt well to school
- Graduate and go on to post-secondary education

Nonetheless, when drilling down to determine what types of involvement work best, SEDL found one common factor: "Programs and interventions that engage families in supporting their children's learning at home are linked to higher student achievement." Other forms of involvement among Epstein's six factors (volunteering, attending school events) appeared to have less direct effect on student achievement, particularly in high school. Examples of academic gains among those in home learning activities abound:

- A literacy program in Minnesota that included home and school activities on literacy for kindergartners and their families generated significant positive gains. Under Project EASE (Early Access to Success in Education), trained parent educators provide coaching for parents in developing literacy skills. The teachers also send home literacy-related activities for parents and children to do together. A study of effects in four low-income schools and one middle-income school found that Project EASE participants had significantly greater gains on language scores than those in a control group (Jordan, Snow and Porche, 2000). In addition, children who began the program with the lowest scores recorded the greatest gains.
- In a Westat/PSA study, teachers at Title I elementary schools conducted extensive outreach to parents of low-achieving students by sending materials home, meeting face to face with parents and maintaining frequent telephone contact when their children had problems. Researchers found that this outreach led to improved student achievement in reading and math. In schools with high levels of reported parent outreach, test scores increased at a 40 percent higher rate compared to schools with low levels of outreach.
- In West Virginia, nine schools sought to enhance parents' skills by offering workshops at school entrance at which the adults received learning packets in reading and math and training on how to use them. In assessing the progress of 335 participating Title I students, Shaver and Walls (1998) found that students with more highly involved parents made stronger reading and math gains than less involved parents on the Comprehensive Test of Basic Skills. The finding was apparent across all income levels. In addition, family income had no effect on involvement, as low-income families were just as likely to attend the workshops as higher-income families.

SEDL's conclusions are reflected in other studies as well. Catasambis (1998) uncovered similar findings in reviewing National Educational Longitudinal Study (NELS:88) data, analyzing data on 13,500 families as their children progressed through school. She measured the value of the six types of parent involvement and also concluded that techniques to enhance learning at home had the strongest effect. For older students, these techniques largely focused on enabling parents to convey high expectations to their children, encouraging them to take and succeed in rigorous courses with an eye toward college.

"When their families guided them to classes that would lead to higher education, students were more likely to enroll in a higher-level program, earn credits, and score higher on tests," she said. Regardless of family background, the issue of

parent expectations had the strongest effect on grade 12 test scores in all subjects. Areas of parent involvement that produced fewer long-term effects were communication between school and parent, attending school events/volunteering, and activities to promote effective parenting.

Catsambis also found that families positively influence the educational achievements of their teens (as evidenced by larger number of course credits and more college-prep courses) through high levels of educational expectations and consistent encouragement.

The value of homework

For elementary and middle school-age children, interactive homework assignments that bring parents and children together are quite valuable. One of the leading examples is an initiative designed by Epstein and her Johns Hopkins colleagues called TIPS (Teachers Involving Parents in Schoolwork). In a study of TIPS for Writing in two Baltimore middle schools, Epstein found that parent involvement boosted sixth- and eighth-grade writing scores of nearly 700 sixth- and eighth-grade students. In addition, the extent of TIPS homework completed affected student scores, with those doing more TIPS homework showing better language arts grades (Epstein, Simon, and Salinas, 1997).

Van Voorhis (2001) found similar results in science achievement when comparing students who had interactive TIPS homework and those who had no such interactive work. Among a diverse population of 253 students, students who started TIPS activities in 6th grade earned significantly better science grades during middle school than the comparison group. This trend was evident even after controlling for prior grades, family background, and amount of homework completed. In addition, some TIPS students moved up from lower-level classes in 6th grade to average or honors classes by 8th grade.

TIPS builds in homework participation by parents or family members from elementary through high school. At the elementary level, activities typically include a "Dear Parent" introductory note — signed by the student — explaining the theme of the evening's homework activity. For a math worksheet on fractional parts, for example, the student is to explain a figure depicting the fraction $\frac{1}{2}$ to his or her family partner. The next problems ask students to show the family partner how they can express specific illustrations of shaded circles as fractions. At the end is a note from the teacher asking the parent to describe their child's work on the activities and whether the child understands a concept or needs more assistance. The parent then signs the sheet to return to the teacher. Similarly, an elementary science worksheet on the importance of animals asks students to discuss with their family partner the different types of products that come from animals. From this beginning, the student is to observe objects around the house and identify items that derive from animals or animal products. At the end, parents are to gauge the success of the activity and sign a note back to the teacher.

At the high school level, there is less emphasis on a "Dear Parent" section, but the activities require specific parent involvement to complete. For example, a social studies assignment on "Why Do We Need Government" has students interview a parent or other family member who is at least 20 years older to answer whether certain social conditions — poverty, health care, education, crime, race relations, and individual freedom — have improved, gotten worse or stayed the same. Students then write down their own views on a separate piece of paper. At the end, parents answer whether the assignment helped them learn what their child is doing in class.

TIPS is not the only family-focused activity with home-based activities studied by Epstein and colleagues. Elsewhere, school-designed programs to involve families in student reading yield positive results in achievement. A review of literature on the topic found that, across the grades, subject-specific interventions to involve families in reading and related language arts activities positively affected students' reading skills and scores (Sheldon & Epstein, 2005b).

Other types of involvement work too

While parent involvement on homework may be the award-winning strategy, that doesn't mean that parent involvement elsewhere is useless. Targeted programs have proved effective, especially with solving problems that are typically barriers to student achievement.

For example, communicating with families using targeted content about attendance can increase average daily attendance rates and reduce chronic absences at elementary schools (Epstein & Sheldon, 2002) and at both elementary and secondary schools (Sheldon & Epstein 2004). This content can be grouped into two main categories:

- **Parenting practices.** Conducting workshops about getting children to school, making home visits, and using contracts to commit parents to high rates of children's school attendance.
- **Communication practices.** Conducting parent orientations to explain attendance policies and expectations; sending home newsletters with the names of students with excellent attendance; giving families information on how to contact the school; and providing access to children's attendance information on the Internet.

The scholars compiled the findings in a longitudinal study of 39 schools identified for the National Network of Partnership Schools (NNPS), a group of more than 1,000 schools that have made school-community partnerships a priority. In addition, the authors noted, "Schools that conducted a greater total number of attendance-focused activities were more likely to decrease the percentage of students who missed twenty or more days of school each year. Sheldon followed up on this work with a 2007 study examining 69 NNPS schools against 69 non-NNPS comparison schools, finding that the NNPS schools posted higher attendance rates.

"Even after the strong effects of prior rates of absenteeism were accounted for, communicating with families about attendance, celebrating good attendance with students and families, and connecting chronically absent students with community mentors measurably reduced students' chronic absenteeism from one year to the next," the authors stated in the 2004 report. In addition, NNP schools in Ohio had stronger attendance rates than a matched sample of non-participating schools that did not focus on partnership development and parent outreach (Sheldon, 2004).

In a similar vein, schools with a strong record of family and community involvement often tied these activities to a goal of improved student behavior. These schools reported fewer student disciplinary actions from one year to the next (Sheldon & Epstein, 2002). In addition, the studies reviewed in the first SEDL study show that outreach, communication and community organizing efforts can yield positive benefits such as increased levels of parent engagement, improved school facilities, greater after-school activities, and increased parent activism.

SEDL returned to the topic in a later meta-analysis on the school/family connection, reviewing 58 studies conducted between 2003 and 2008 (Ferguson, 2008). One conclusion of this study is that regular interaction between parents and teachers helps students adjust more easily to school and classroom expectations, which can translate into higher achievement. Also, while attending PTA meetings or participating in parent-teacher conferences are often expected, Ferguson concludes that districts and schools that "target activities and processes to give families the tools and the information they need to engage effectively in school improvement create a stronger system of education and provide additional resources for both students and school systems."

Therefore, it is essential for schools to first identify target areas where there is low student achievement. After that fundamental action, schools then are well positioned to design workshops, lending materials, and other activities so that families have information to help their children. Educators can seek parent input in this process, since they may have useful ideas on strategies that help their children learn.

Finally, one recent study (Warren, Hong, Rubin and Uy, 2009) also argues that community-based organizations (CBOs) can play an important role in helping schools engage parents. The researchers conducted three case studies of urban schools that partnered with CBOs to enhance parent outreach, concluding that CBOs help schools bridge the cultural and perceived power gap between teachers and parents.

No substitute for good schools

However, as noted in a study of middle school transition, parent involvement alone does not solve every problem. In a study cited by the SEDL meta-analysis, Gutman and Midgely (2000) examined factors that promoted a smooth transition to middle school, finding that the combination of parent and school involvement had a strong effect on grades of low-income African American students. While no single factor appeared to promote success, a different picture emerged when examining multiple factors. For example, students reporting a high level of parent involvement and a strong sense of belonging had higher-than-average grades, as did student with high levels of parent involvement and teacher support. The study included parent involvement activities such as checking homework, talking to students about school, attending events, and volunteering at school activities. Support from teachers was defined as teachers taking time to work with students in a constructive rather than critical way.

"This study suggests that if children don't feel connected to school, parent involvement alone will not make a significant contribution to student achievement. Students must also feel that they belong at school and that their teachers support them," SEDL noted.

Even an expert such as Johns Hopkins' Epstein recognizes that parent involvement strategies, while important, are not a cure-all for a struggling school. As the SEDL meta-analysis reported, a 1997 study by the parent involvement expert and colleagues noted that parent involvement alone is not the only essential ingredient for high achievement. "School, family, and community partnerships can boost attendance and increase achievement slightly, but excellent classroom teaching will be needed to dramatically improve students' writing, reading, and math skills to meet the state's standards." Nonetheless, as SEDL concluded, new high-quality programs and school reform efforts can be made more effective when they engage families as full partners in the drive to raise achievement.

Conclusion

Parents of all income levels and ethnicities want to be involved in their child's learning, even if they aren't often visible at bake sales or PTA meetings. However, schools and parents often have a different understanding of what that involvement should look like. Creating a partnership between schools and parents can have a significant impact on student achievement.

One of the best ways to structure that partnership is through involving parents in their children's homework. While all forms of parent involvement play significant roles in the health of the school and the community, home learning activities are perhaps the wisest investment of school dollars and effort to produce long-lasting academic gains. While such involvement is fairly straightforward in elementary school, it's also possible later on. At the middle and high school level, school activities that promote the parent's role in maintaining high expectations for their children benefit students.

Finally, targeted parent involvement to solve a particular problem — such as poor attendance or behavior — can also be beneficial. And parent involvement should be a support, not a substitute, for the true work of schools: good teaching and learning. But the research is clear: parents want to be involved, and parent involvement can make a difference in student learning. Structuring the partnership between schools and parents is one of the best things school boards can do.

What can school board members do?

- As SEDL noted, "Recognize that all parents, regardless of income, education or cultural background, are involved in their children's learning and want their children to do well."
- Survey parents and teachers to understand their perspective on parent involvement. Investigate how parents want to be involved, and how teachers want parents to be involved.
- Work to create a common understanding of how parents could best support their child's education and how teachers could communicate with parents. This might be accomplished through discussions, flyers, meetings or other strategies.
- Identify barriers to achievement within schools. Can parents help address these challenges? If so, how?
- Give teachers training on how to develop homework assignments that involve parents.
- Regularly involve parents in their child's homework, and report on the results of doing so.
- In middle school and high school, talk clearly to parents about the courses and grades their students will need to succeed.
- Continue to survey or otherwise track the effects of involvement, in order to use schools' time and resources wisely. In these tight economic times, focus on putting schools' money and energy into what works best, rather than continuing ineffective programs.

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