

Parent, Family, Community Involvement in Education

Parents, families, educators and communities—there's no better partnership to assure that all students pre-K- to high school—have the support and resources they need to succeed in school and in life.

—NEA President Dennis Van Roekel

It takes a village to raise a child is a popular proverb with a clear message: the whole community has an essential role to play in the growth and development of its young people. In addition to the vital role that parents and family members play in a child's education, the broader community too has a responsibility to assure high-quality education for all students.

In the past, parent involvement was characterized by volunteers, mostly mothers, assisting in the classroom, chaperoning students, and fundraising. Today, the old model has been replaced with a much more inclusive approach: school-family-community partnerships now include mothers and fathers, stepparents, grandparents, foster parents, other relatives and caregivers, business leaders and community groups—all participating in goal-oriented activities, at all grade levels, linked to student achievement and school success.

The research is clear, consistent, and convincing

Parent, family, and community involvement in education correlates with higher academic performance and school improvement. When schools, parents, families, and communities work together to support learning, students tend to earn higher grades, attend school more regularly, stay in school longer, and enroll in higher level programs. Researchers cite parent-family-community involvement as a key to addressing the school dropout crisis¹ and note that strong school-family-community partnerships foster higher educational aspirations and more motivated students.² The evidence holds true for students at both the elementary and secondary level, regardless of the parent's education, family income, or background—and the research shows parent involvement affects minority students' academic achievement across all races.³

Supporting teaching and learning requires addressing students' social service needs, as well as their academic ones, and this broad-based support is essential to closing achievement gaps. The positive impact of connecting community resources with student needs is well documented.⁴ In fact, community support of the educational process is considered one of the characteristics common to high-performing schools.⁵

How do parents, families, and communities get involved?

Parent, family, and community involvement means different things to different people. A research-based framework,⁶ developed by Joyce Epstein of Johns Hopkins University, describes six types of involvement—parenting, communicating, volunteering, learning at home, decision making, and collaborating with the community—that offer a broad range of school, family, and community activities that can engage all parties and help meet student needs. Successful school-parent-community partnerships are not stand-alone projects or add-on programs but are well integrated with the school's overall mission and goals. Research and fieldwork show that parent-school-partnerships improve schools, strengthen families, build community support, and increase student achievement and success.

States press for more partnerships

Data compiled in 2005⁷ show that 17 states have directed all districts or schools to implement parental involvement policies. Seven states—Alaska, California, Indiana, Minnesota, Nevada, South Carolina, and Texas—have obligated schools or districts to develop policies linking parent-community partnerships to school improvement plans, and in Delaware, schools applying for school improvement grants must include parental involvement strategies in grant applications. In addition, many states promote parental involvement in early literacy, school safety, and dropout prevention

programs, as well as in initiatives addressing the needs of at-risk youth and English Language Learners. Some state policies echo the provisions of Section 1118 of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) that direct schools and districts receiving Title I funds to use a portion of those funds to involve parents, educators, and the community in the shared responsibility of improving their students' academic achievement.

Although the research unequivocally affirms the positive and long-lasting effects of parent, family, and community involvement on student learning, this data is often overlooked in local, state, and national discussions about raising student achievement and closing achievement gaps. Education reform efforts that focus solely on classrooms and schools are leaving out critical factors essential for long-term success. What happens before and after school can be as important as what happens during the school day. Even the most promising reforms can be "reversed by family, negated by neighborhoods, and might well be subverted or minimized by what happens to children outside of school."⁸ While education is clearly an asset to the individual, it also benefits families and serves the common good. Education is a core value of our democratic society, and it is in everyone's self-interest to insure that all children receive a quality education. Our democracy, as well as our economy, depends on an educated citizenry and skilled workforce.

Too many policymakers, community leaders, and even parents still view schools and student learning as the sole responsibility of educators. While educators take their professional responsibilities seriously, they also recognize that they cannot do it alone. They need and depend on the support from parents and community members.

One dynamic too often observed is that parent involvement in education tends to decline as their children go up in grade, with a dramatic drop once students reach middle school.⁹ In fact, the lack of parental involvement is viewed by teachers, administrators, the public, and even parents of school-age children, as the single biggest problem facing our nation's schools.¹⁰

To promote student growth and school success at every grade and age, well thought out parent-community-school partnerships, linked to school improvement goals, are needed in every community.

Epstein's Framework on Involvement

- **Parenting.** Assist families with parenting skills, family support, understanding child and adolescent development, and setting home conditions to support learning at each age and grade level. Assist schools in understanding families' backgrounds, cultures, and goals for children.
- **Communicating.** Communicate with families about school programs and student progress. Create two-way communication channels between school and home that are effective and reliable.
- **Volunteering.** Improve recruitment and training to involve families as volunteers and as audiences at the school or in other locations. Enable educators to work with volunteers who support students and the school. Provide meaningful work and flexible scheduling.
- **Learning at Home.** Involve families with their children in academic learning at home, including homework, goal setting, and other curriculum-related activities.
- **Decision Making.** Include families as participants in school decisions, governance, and advocacy activities through school councils or improvement teams, committees, and other organizations.
- **Collaborating with the Community.** Coordinate resources and services for families, students, and the school with community groups, including businesses, agencies, cultural and civic organizations, and colleges or universities.

What hinders involvement?

Parents see lots of roadblocks to getting involved in their child's education.¹¹ Some point to their own demanding schedules and say they don't have extra time to volunteer or even attend school activities, much less get involved in bigger ways. Others reveal how uncomfortable they feel when trying to communicate with school officials, whether that's due to language or cultural differences or their own past experiences with school. Some say they lack the know-how and resources to help their child, or they express frustration with school bureaucracies or policies they find impossible to understand or change.

Some parents complain that they rarely hear from the school unless there is a problem with their child's behavior or performance. Others say the information provided by the school is not comprehensible either because of educational jargon or because the parent or family member does not read or understand English.

Some families criticize school personnel for not understanding the plight of single parents, grandparents, foster parents, or other caregivers. Others say they lack transpor-