

# Issues in Parental Involvement

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**Abstract:** This paper examines kinds of parental involvement for student achievement. It draws on current literature concerning each kind of involvement's effect on student achievement. The perspectives of educators on parental involvement are explored, as are communication between home and school and roadblocks encountered in parental involvement initiatives.

In its report, *A Nation at Risk*, the National Commission on Excellence in Education (1983) concluded that the mediocrity of our nation's schools was threatening the economic competitiveness of the country. Since then, all levels of government and educational institutions have been scrambling to reform America's educational system. The Clinton administration continued the reform movement when it passed the Goals 2000 Act (U.S. Dept. of Education, 1994). In section 102 of this Act, parental involvement is specifically mentioned as a key to student achievement: to accommodate the varying needs of parents, improve student achievement through parental involvement, give parents the opportunity to have a voice in the educational decision-making process, and hold teachers accountable to high standards. Despite the government's show of support and a plethora of research suggesting parental involvement improves student achievement, the partnership between home and school is still weak.

The purpose of this research paper is to examine the literature on the effects of parental involvement on student achievement. First, there is a clarification of the different kinds of parental involvement. This is followed by an examination of the effects of parenting on student achievement, educators' perspectives on parental involvement, communication between home and school, and problems in parental involvement initiatives. Based on the literature, a conclusion suggests how parental involvement initiatives can be implemented successfully and how current roadblocks to parental involvement can be overcome.

## Kinds of Parental Involvement

Parental involvement does not have a single clear and consistent definition. It has been defined as parents' aspirations for their children's academic achievement (Bloom, 1980); parents' communication with their children about education and school concerns (Christenson, Rounds, & Gorney, 1992; Walberg, 1986); parents' participation in school activities (Stevenson & Baker, 1987); parents' communication with teachers about their children (Epstein, 1991); and parental supervision at home (T.Z. Keith, Reimers, Fehrmann, Pottebaum, & Aubrey, 1986; T.Z. Keith et al., 1993; Marjoribanks, 1983). Rather than focus on a single definition, Epstein (1987) has defined six different types of parental involvement: parenting, communicating, volunteering, learning at home, decision making, and collaborating with the community.

### *Parenting*

Authoritative parenting is defined as "a combination of high levels of warmth and acceptance, behavioral control, and psychological autonomy granting" (Deslandes, Royer, & Turcotte, 1997, p. 1). Studies on adolescents imply a positive correlation between authoritative parenting and academic achievement (Dornbush, Ritter, Leiderman, Roberts, & Fraleigh, 1987; Lamborn, Brown, Mounts, & Steinberg, 1993; Steinberg, Lamborn, Dornbush, & Darling, 1992).

Students with higher grades tend to have parents who are firm, warm, involved, and democratic (Dornbush et al., 1987; Lamborn, et al., 1993; Steinberg et al., 1992). Of the three characteristics of authoritative parenting, behavior control was the strongest predictor of adolescents' academic achievement (Deslandes et al., 1997).

#### *Educators' Perspective on Parental Involvement*

Educators tend to focus less on parenting and more on formal acts of parental involvement that are initiated by the school (Brown, 1989). Parent conferences, school performances and functions, and correspondence with teachers are common forms of parental involvement that are encouraged by schools. Schools are also asking parents to get involved by volunteering their time. Some parents can be found volunteering in libraries, lunchrooms, and classrooms. Others work with the Parent Teacher Association or on school committees. Parents are particularly accustomed to playing a major role in school-fundraising activities (Ramirez, 2001).

The best way for parents to help their children succeed academically is to tutor their children using specific learning activities created by the teacher to reinforce work being done in class (Epstein, 1986). Epstein (2001) and Jones (2001) assert that it is the teacher's responsibility to design effective interactive assignments that will not overwhelm parents of different ethnic and educational backgrounds. In turn, it is the school and school board's responsibility to help teachers decide what kind of homework is given.

Epstein cautioned that while interactive homework should be a regular activity, it should not be nightly. Epstein stresses, "Every night should not be interactive homework, because it really is a matter of having a family-friendly schedule" (Epstein, 2001, p. 38). Epstein (2001) also warned that progress related to interactive homework in one subject area does not transfer to other areas where interactive homework is not being used. Therefore, it is important to design interactive homework across the curriculum.

#### *Communication*

Another aspect of parental involvement connected with student achievement is communication. Researchers found a negative correlation between parental communication with teachers and adolescents' school grades (Baker & Stevenson, 1986; Deslandes et al., 1997). As suggested by Epstein (1996), it is more likely that parents and teachers will communicate when a student is having problems at school. Ramirez (2001) found that teachers would like to initiate more positive phone calls home, but did not feel that they had the time because of the number of students they taught. Epstein (1995, 1996) concluded that new relationships need to be formed between parents and teachers based on good news, open houses, social events, and recognition of student success.

#### *Collaborating with the Community*

Schools need to respond to community needs. They need to realize that families are not necessarily nuclear (Pennekamp & Freeman, 1988). Schools need to broaden their definition of family to include other parental figures. Others assert that schools need to become more aware of the diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds of their students and their students' families (Delgado-Gaitan, 1991; Salend & Taylor, 1993). Sending home information is unproductive if the information cannot be understood or will not be used.

### **Problems in Parental Involvement Initiatives**

There are many reasons why parental involvement initiatives often fail to get off the ground. Jones (2001, p. 42) suggested, "Teachers have busy schedules, messages get lost, and

besides, who can keep track of 150 kids—let alone 150 families.” McPherson (1972) found that many teachers fear that the well-being of the students as a group may be hurt by the more personalized approach that they believe would be expected when parents become more involved. Becher (1986) found a variety of reasons why teachers are reluctant to encourage parental involvement, including their belief that parental involvement diminishes their power as “experts.” Teachers also believe that parental involvement activities take too much time to plan, turn teaching responsibilities over to parents, and are ineffective because parents do not know how to teach children (Becher, 1986).

Baker (1997) found that teachers felt very negatively about parents and did not want to interact with parents. It comes as little surprise then that many teachers in the study were slow to contact parents because they hoped to avoid a confrontation. Baker explained that teachers “don’t want to be blamed, and they don’t want the hostility to come back at them” (Baker, as cited in Jones, 2001, p. 39).

When motivated teachers do find the time to initiate parental involvement, they often become frustrated by what they perceive as a lack of support from parents (Brown, 1989). Parents may not attend conferences or school open houses; they may not check homework or answer notes from teachers. Wagenaar (1977) reported that parents found that, at times, the school itself becomes the enemy when the bureaucracy discourages parents from getting involved and expressing their concerns, complaints, and demands. Brown (1989) offers the following reasons why parents may not be actively involved in parental involvement initiatives: parents lack the time necessary to become involved in school parental involvement initiatives; it is unreasonable to expect that working parents will attend school events during the day; during the evening, parents may feel it is more important to spend time with their family than to attend a meeting at school; the cost and hassle of obtaining a babysitter can be a deterrent; some parents feel that they lack the skills to help; past personal experiences lead some parents to perceive a visit to the school as a negative experience; and finally, some parents are concerned that they might infringe upon the responsibilities of the teachers and school administrators. Ramirez (2001) concurred that if parents became actively involved, they felt they were considered “nosey” or a “problem.” They were considered “not caring” if they did not.

Parents are more likely to participate when they feel their contributions are important and directly affect student achievement. Parents are willing participants in classroom activities, parent meetings, and policy-planning sessions (McKinney, 1980). Parents are then allowed the opportunity to contribute to the decision-making process of the school. Parents are less interested in meetings about careers, job training, and social services. They most dislike social and fundraising activities, two expectations of parental involvement. Jones (2001) and C. Okpala, A. Okpala, and Smith (2001) assert that these activities serve no purpose toward student achievement. Okpala et al. (2001) postulate that parents volunteering in their children’s schools are more likely to positively affect their children’s academic progress than parents volunteering in schools where they do not have children because the former parents are sending a positive message to both their children and their children’s teachers. The children will be more likely to take their class work seriously, and teachers will be more motivated, knowing that parents are concerned.

Although a number of researchers (Dornbush et al., 1987; Lamborn et al., 1993; Steinberg et al., 1992) have found that parental involvement does affect adolescent achievement, Keith et al. (1986) and Natriello & McDill (1986) found that despite overwhelming evidence that parental involvement leads to higher student achievement in elementary schools, parental

involvement has little effect on adolescent academic achievement. T.Z. Keith (1991) suggests that the numerous definitions of parental involvement are partially to blame for this discrepancy. De Carvalho (2001) argued against the current constructs of parental involvement. She concluded that school parental involvement efforts have failed to consider families' socioeconomic status, culture, and feelings about school. In her view, parental involvement initiatives are geared toward upper-middle-class families. She suggested that many parents are not sufficiently educated to teach their children at home. Interactive homework is also not feasible in families with a single parent, two working parents, economic difficulties, or family stress. This questions why families are being asked to convert family activities into an extension of class activities at the expense of cultural pluralism, family leisure, and rest (De Carvalho, 2001). Schools and teachers have no right to tell parents what they should do in their free time. Parents are increasingly being asked to provide for the academic growth of their children in addition to their social and emotional growth. Parental involvement programs put the onus of educational improvement on families instead of schools. She fears that current parental involvement practices will only increase the disparity in academic achievement between children whose parents have the ability, time, and willingness to help and those whose parents do not (De Carvalho, 2001).

### **Conclusion and Implications**

The research makes it apparent that a carefully planned and focused school-wide initiative is more effective than the potpourri of efforts that exist in most schools today. In planning a parental involvement program, schools must first consider family lifestyles and cultural backgrounds. In what ways, and to what degree, are parents willing and able to get involved? Private schools and schools in affluent areas may have more freedom in developing parental involvement programs because their parents are more likely to be willing and able to help their children and the school in the manner the schools expect.

For a parental-involvement program to get off the ground, teachers need to be given the time and resources to direct parental involvement in their class. Any parental involvement initiative that is perceived by teachers as “just one more job” is doomed to failure. However, if teachers are given the time and training to involve parents effectively, it is reasonable to expect that they will be supportive of the program. Training for teachers needs to come in two forms: professional development for existing teachers and quality instruction in teacher education programs. Clearly, the training of teachers in parental involvement is an area that needs to be addressed in future research.

To encourage parents to become more involved, teachers and school administration need to communicate more effectively. Scheduling has a lot to do with encouraging effective communication between home and school. Parents are more likely to become involved when schools hold events and parent-teacher conferences at times that are convenient for parents. Many schools, both public and private, have already moved in this direction by scheduling parent-teacher conferences in the evening as well as during the day. Furthermore, teachers need to communicate more often. Currently, teachers tend to phone parents only when there is a problem. There is little wonder that parents become defensive in their dealings with teachers when they think teachers only call if there is a problem. By calling parents regularly, teachers open the door to effective two-way communication. Communication needs to become more focused on building student self-esteem, school-parent partnerships, and conflict prevention—as

opposed to problem solving only. Although teachers' time is always limited, they may actually save time in the long run by avoiding conflicts with parents and encouraging parental support.

Finally, parental involvement at home cannot become a replacement for a quality education at school. Schools and teachers need to be conscious of the shift in responsibility that is beginning to take place. Schools need to maintain the primary responsibility for the academic success of each child. Parents should be partners in this endeavor, but their primary focus should be the social and emotional growth of their children. Parental involvement programs need to build partnerships between home and school—not extend school life into the home at the cost of family life and culture.

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