
FAMILY-SCHOOL PARTNERSHIPS: INFORMATION AND APPROACHES FOR EDUCATORS

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Educators across the nation have long declared the importance of family involvement in children's education. Considering the large amount of time children spend outside of school, up to 87% of waking hours, it is easy to see how families have a profound impact on children's educational lives. Families dramatically influence the degree to which children are engaged in school and how they identify themselves as learners. A strong family-school partnership will improve both academic and behavioral outcomes for children.

Importance of Family-School Partnerships

Academic benefits. When families are involved in children's academic lives, grades improve, test scores rise, and even students' attitudes toward schoolwork improve. Students complete more homework, are placed in special education less often, and enroll in postsecondary education more frequently when families and schools work together. In a climate in which schools are increasingly pressured to raise student achievement and test scores, facilitating these out-of-school influences is critical.

Behavioral benefits. The benefits of a strong family-school relationship extend beyond academic work. Other benefits of family involvement in schooling include improved behavior at school, higher attendance rates, lower drop-out rates, higher self esteem, and higher probability of avoiding high-risk behavior in adolescence.

Critical Issues in Forming Family-School Partnerships

It is important to focus on how families and schools can work together to improve outcomes for students. Research has demonstrated that school policies, teacher practices, and family practices are all more important than race, parent education, family size, marital status, and even student grade level in determining a family's continuing involvement in children's education. In fact, the best predictors of family involvement are school programs and teacher practices that encourage and guide such involvement—not family demographics.

Real partnership. First, consider whether schools engage in one-way, school-directed communications or if schools establish real partnerships. A partnership requires families and educators to work together toward a shared goal. Issues that arise in creating partnerships are power and control. Reciprocal listening, understanding, and power sharing may be uncomfortable for both school personnel and family members. However, the resulting empowerment of families and coordination of educational efforts is important for student success.

Family participation. When establishing partnerships, educators need to recognize that family members experience a variety of stressors, including, possibly, their own negative experiences with school. Other hurdles that may hinder family members' participation in their child's education include limited expectations of their role in the educational process, low sense of efficacy for helping their children succeed in school, and negative perceptions of the invitations, demands, and opportunities for involvement. Families that do not feel connected or welcome to the school or that have not been invited by their child or the school to participate may not realize the importance of their involvement.

Flexibility. Finally, as family dynamics change and as work demands and barriers (e.g., lack of day care or transportation) increase, the framework for family-school partnerships must be flexible to ensure its success. Therefore, participants in the family-school relationship must remain both flexible and sensitive regarding diverse school experiences among families, economic and time constraints, diverse linguistic and cultural practices, different values, and exclusionary or unilateral school practices and procedures.

Developmental Issues in Family-School Partnerships

While family involvement typically decreases with each school year and drops off dramatically during the middle school years, the need for families to actively support their child's education does not decrease. Recent research has suggested that family involvement for teenagers is just as important, if not more important, than it is for elementary school children. Therefore, it is crucial to ensure that schools make every effort to encourage and maintain active involvement with families of students in secondary school as well as in the lower grades.

The form of involvement can vary across the years. While young elementary students may need family members to assist them with completing their homework, older students may need encouragement to take challenging classes and support for forming study groups with classmates. In either case, it is important for families to convey high expectations and good attitudes toward school as well as to assist their children in career planning and goal setting.

How to Promote Effective Family-School Partnerships

Promote Regular, Positive Communication

The key to building a collaborative relationship between families and schools, like any relationship, is regular, positive communication. This requires a focus on both the quantity and quality of interactions with which educators communicate with families.

In order to build a strong relationship with family members, educators will need to engage in sustained contact with the families throughout the entire school year. Although the actual number of interactions will depend upon the needs of the child, educators should plan to:

Set the tone at the start of the school year. Prior to and early in the school year, the interactions among families and school staff are mainly limited to the completion of required paperwork and the exchange of information about school regulations and practices. Instead, schools can use this opportunity to set a welcoming tone by ensuring a personal contact with every family.

Establish a relationship before concerns arise. Waiting to contact families only after an academic or behavioral concern has arisen can lead to an adversarial relationship. The family may feel put off by what they perceive as a negative message about their child. It is crucial to prevent this situation from developing. Early positive contacts show families that the school cares for

and wants the best possible outcomes for their child as they themselves do.

Contact family members at the first sign of a concern. When a concern does arise, an immediate response not only helps in solving the problem quickly, it also demonstrates respect for the family and the value placed on their input.

Build the partnership over time. Regular contact with families throughout the school year will enable educators to answer questions, to provide feedback on student performance, and to develop solutions collaboratively for any concerns that arise. While both families and educators desire more face-to-face contact, most work schedules make this difficult to arrange. Educators need to rely on a variety of mediums to promote open communication including phone calls, letters, e-mail, newsletters, and special note folders sent home with students. Also most traditional one-way communication tools, like letters and newsletters, could include postcards or clip-out sections that give families opportunities to respond with questions and comments.

Ask the right questions. When working with family members, it is crucial to remember that both written and verbal communication must be open, welcoming, and respectful. While all educators are college graduates and most are middle class, many family members are not. Some may not have had any experience with formal education. However, they do have important knowledge about their child, so it is important to ask the right questions and really listen for the answers. Educators will first need to put family members at ease and to encourage them to be comfortable opening up.

While respecting cultural, linguistic, and socioeconomic differences, educators need to ask:

- What are the family's goals and expectations for their child?
- How does the family support their child's learning at home?
- In what ways can the school help the family assist their child to be more successful?
- How can the family help the school assist their child to be more successful?
- What else would assist the family in helping their child to be more successful?

In addition, educators should always ask what questions family members have about the school in particular and the education process in general. It is more likely that family members will respond if the assumption is that they have questions. Therefore, it might be more helpful to ask, "What questions do you have?" rather than "Do you have any questions?" If they

still have no questions after a few prompts, remind them that they should feel free to contact the school, or you personally, if any questions arise.

Only with regular, positive communication can families and educators begin to develop a partnership built on shared responsibilities aiming toward the achievement of shared goals.

Provide a Variety of Opportunities for Family-School Interaction

Although families and educators should be equal partners in helping children achieve in school, they have complementary, not identical, roles that lead them to support learning in different ways.

How families can support learning. Various models of family involvement suggest that there are many ways for family members to support student achievement. Families can provide home environments that support learning and help their child develop personal skills that improve their ability to benefit from school. In addition they can support their child's motivation to learn by passing on the value of education through sharing, such as discussing school activities. Families can help their child plan for a future career and make good educational choices to get there. Furthermore, families can help schools by participating in decision-making teams and by sharing their knowledge of community resources.

How schools can support family involvement. Likewise, educators can use varying levels of involvement as a guide to provide different opportunities for parents to be active partners. A few examples may include:

- Sharing information for inclusion in school newsletters
- Sharing knowledge based on their personal history (e.g., sharing about experiences living in another country), culture (e.g., sharing about Navajo culture), and skills (e.g., sharing about careers or hobbies)
- Assisting in the preparation of learning materials
- Advocating for curriculum changes and school reform initiatives
- Participating on teams to develop school policies and procedures

Including families in problem solving. These interactive relationships are particularly important for educators and families when they are trying to help solve problems with children. When either a school staff or family member has a concern for a child, family members need to be included as full team members and not just as recipients of knowledge and services. Family

members can provide another set of eyes and ears to gather information for assessments. They can provide assistance for brainstorming solutions and planning interventions. And they can provide support for implementing interventions and delivering consequences, both positive and negative.

Provide Important Information to Families

Research has much to offer families and schools in the way of knowledge about increasing learning opportunities for children. However, families may have more limited access to this information than do educators. Schools can become natural distribution points for critical information about helping children. Most families desire specific information about educational activities they can do with their child. Also, educators can provide helpful guidelines for creating home environments that promote children's success, such as scheduling homework times, engaging in leisure reading, and exploring lesson topics further, as well as limiting time spent watching TV or playing video games. Schools can also share information about community services and activities that offer support and additional opportunities for learning for everyone in the family.

Educators can inform families of the significance of their attitudes toward education. It is critical for families to place a high value on education, have high expectations, and believe that effort, not luck, will result in learning. Also, families can recognize and call attention to naturally occurring learning opportunities that can increase their child's curiosity and can develop their love for learning. When concerns arise, families can offer encouragement and assistance instead of blaming or punishment as their first course of action.

When schools share information, however, be careful not to give the impression that the family is being judged and found lacking. Rather, emphasize what research tells all of us about behaviors and attitudes that increase children's chances of success and what local opportunities exist for families.

Summary

Children from families that are regularly and constructively involved in their education attain higher levels of academic and social competence. Research indicates that schools can play a crucial part in ensuring a positive, ongoing relationship with family members. Clearly, family-school partnerships require effort and flexibility, but the potential benefits for children and their families, as well as the school as a whole, are worth it.

Resources

- Christenson, S. L., & Sheridan, S. M. (2001). *Schools and families: Creating essential connections for learning*. New York: Guilford. ISBN: 1572306548.
- Epstein, J. L., Sanders, M. G., Simon, B. S., Salinas, K. C., Jansorn, N. R., & Van Voorhis, F. L. (2002). *School, family, and community partnerships: Your handbook for action* (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin. ISBN: 0761976655.
- Redding, S. (2000). *Parents and learning*. (Educational practices series, no. 2.) New York: International Academy of Education and the International Bureau of Education. Available: www.ibe.unesco.org (available in English, Spanish, and Korean at www.ibe.unesco.org/International/Publications/EducationalPractices/prachome.htm)
- Rutherford, B. (Ed.) (1995). *Creating family/school partnerships*. Columbus, OH: National Middle School Association. ASIN: 1560900865.

Websites

- National Coalition for Parent Involvement in Education—www.ncpie.org
- National Network of Partnership Schools at Johns Hopkins University—
www.csos.jhu.edu/p2000/default.htm

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The National Association of School Psychologists (NASP) offers a wide variety of free or low cost online resources to parents, teachers, and others working with children and youth through the NASP website www.nasponline.org

and the NASP Center for Children & Families website www.naspcenter.org. Or use the direct links below to access information that can help you improve outcomes for the children and youth in your care.

About School Psychology—Downloadable brochures, FAQs, and facts about training, practice, and career choices for the profession.
www.nasponline.org/about_nasp/spsych.html

Crisis Resources—Handouts, fact sheets, and links regarding crisis prevention/intervention, coping with trauma, suicide prevention, and school safety.
www.nasponline.org/crisisresources

Culturally Competent Practice—Materials and resources promoting culturally competent assessment and intervention, minority recruitment, and issues related to cultural diversity and tolerance.
www.nasponline.org/culturalcompetence

En Español—Parent handouts and materials translated into Spanish. www.naspcenter.org/espanol/

IDEA Information—Information, resources, and advocacy tools regarding IDEA policy and practical implementation.
www.nasponline.org/advocacy/IDEAinformation.html

Information for Educators—Handouts, articles, and other resources on a variety of topics.
www.naspcenter.org/teachers/teachers.html

Information for Parents—Handouts and other resources a variety of topics.
www.naspcenter.org/parents/parents.html

Links to State Associations—Easy access to state association websites.
www.nasponline.org/information/links_state_orgs.html

NASP Books & Publications Store—Review tables of contents and chapters of NASP bestsellers.
www.nasponline.org/bestsellers
Order online. www.nasponline.org/store

Position Papers—Official NASP policy positions on key issues.
www.nasponline.org/information/position_paper.html

Success in School/Skills for Life—Parent handouts that can be posted on your school's website.
www.naspcenter.org/resourcekit