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Family, School and Community Connections: Improving Student Learning

Do family, school and community connections make a difference?

When working together, families, schools and communities can successfully make a difference to improve student learning. In fact, evidence from numerous studies confirms what educators have long known: families can and do have a positive influence on how well their children do in school. In fact, family involvement appears to have a protective effect on student learning. That is, the longer families stay meaningfully involved in their children's education, the more likely their children will be successful in school. Studies also show that communities, too, can have a positive impact on school effectiveness. Although less abundant, research on community engagement has found that when communities mobilize around school improvement efforts many positive outcomes can be achieved, including improved student achievement.

Although conventional wisdom and evidence from research confirms the positive influence that families and community groups can have on student learning, experts caution that strong family, school and community connections are just one important aspect of high-performing schools:

... it takes more than engaged parents to produce high student achievement. Many studies of high-performing schools identify several key characteristics associated with improvement. These include high standards and expectations for all students and curriculum, as well as instruction and assessments aligned with those standards. They also include effective leadership, frequent monitoring of teaching and learning, focused professional development, and high levels of parent and community involvement. (Henderson & Mapp, 2002)

What are the major research findings?

In 2002, Anne Henderson and Karen Mapp published a comprehensive literature review describing the influence of family and community engagement on student achievement. The report entitled, *A New Wave of Evidence: The Impact of School, Family and Community Connections on Student Achievement* synthesized findings from 51 high quality studies. The report included overall findings that described how school, family and community partnerships can work to improve student learning.

Overall Finding - Home-School Partnerships

There is a positive and convincing relationship between family involvement and benefits for students, including improved academic achievement. This relationship holds across families of all economic, racial/ethnic and educational backgrounds and for students at all ages.

- Students whose families are involved in their learning earn better grades, enroll in higher-level programs, have higher graduation rates and are more likely to enroll in postsecondary education.

- When families take an active interest in what they're learning, students display more positive attitudes toward school and behave better in and out of school.
- Children do best if parents can play a variety of roles in their learning; helping at home, volunteering at school, planning their children's future and taking part in key decisions about the school program.
- Middle and high school students whose families remain involved in these ways make better transitions, maintain the quality of their work, develop realistic plans for the future and are less likely to drop out.

Overall Finding – Community Partnerships

There is less research on the effects of community involvement, but findings also suggest benefits for schools, families and students, including improved achievement and behavior.

When community groups and schools develop educational community partnerships, positive results include

- Upgraded school facilities
- Improved school leadership and staffing
- Higher quality learning programs for students
- New resources and programs to improve teaching and curriculum
- Resources for after-school programs and family supports
- Increased social and political capital of participants

Overall Finding – Effective Practices

Parent and community involvement that is linked to improving student learning has a greater effect on achievement than more general forms of involvement.

While research findings show school, family and community partnerships can result in improved student learning, many efforts designed to build these linkages often fail to improve student achievement. Why? Too often, collective energies are focused on well-meaning but more general forms of “involvement” such as volunteerism or fundraising. While these efforts are helpful and even important, studies demonstrate these critical findings:

- School, family and community connections **linked to student learning** are most effective at improving student achievement.
- The most effective programs and interventions are those that engage families in **supporting their children's learning at home**.

What does it take?

Most educational leaders and staff understand the importance of engaging families and communities to support school improvement efforts. Unfortunately for many school districts, true family and community connection remains a challenge. Too often, beliefs, attitudes and fears inhibit the ability for families and schools to join together to support children's learning.

Before we can build strong and effective partnerships with families, we have to believe not only that it's important but also that it can be done – and that we can do it. That means it's

necessary for school staff to hold a set of positive beliefs about family engagement.
(Henderson, Mapp, Johnson & Davies, 2007)

In *Beyond the Bake Sale: The Essential Guide to Family-School Partnerships* (2007) the authors have identified four **core beliefs** of educators, principals, district leaders and other school staff that have served as a foundation for successful family engagement efforts across the nation.

- **All parents have dreams for their children and want the best for them.**
 - All families can and do have a positive effect on their children's learning.
 - Families of all cultural backgrounds, education and income levels encourage their children, talk with them about school, help them plan for higher education, and keep them focused on learning and homework.

- **All parents have the capacity to support their children's learning.**
 - Regardless of how little formal education they may have or what language they speak, all parents can contribute to their children's learning.
 - All parents have "funds of knowledge" about their children and the community that should be respected and tapped by school staff.

- **Parents and school staff should be equal partners.**
 - The relationships between school staff and parents are commonly built on a lopsided power base; instead the power should be shared.
 - Every person who is interested in supporting children's development should have equal status, value and responsibility.

- **The responsibility for building partnerships between school and home rests primarily with school staff, especially school leaders.**
 - To create a climate and culture that supports partnership with parents, strong leadership is essential from district leaders, principals and teachers.
 - School leaders must provide the resources, energy and leadership to implement and sustain partnership programs.

Administrators and teachers can create a culture of partnership by modeling their beliefs, in both words and deeds to the entire school community.

Redefining "Involvement"

A critical concept for school leaders and staff interested in improving school-family-community connections to improve student learning is to understand there are many ways schools can link with families and community members. It is important to also realize that different connections will have different results. Fundraising campaigns and efforts to promote volunteerism may increase resources and improve classroom support, but these efforts will have little if any impact on improving student learning. Therefore it is important for schools to expand the notion of "parent involvement," recognize different ways families and community groups can be involved and to understand the kind of impact those connections will make.

In a recent study, Dr. Gerardo Lopez and fellow researchers (2001) observed different migrant families living in Texas to understand the roles the families played in supporting their children's educational development. Due to living conditions, poverty and other issues related to migrant work, many students of migrant families struggle in school. However, the children in these families were considered successful in school, in both academic and non-academic ways, and the researchers wanted to understand how these families were positively influencing how well their children did in school.

The researchers found that although the migrant families did not often attend school functions, they were highly involved in their children's education.

*This research study found that although parents of successful migrant students did not regularly attend school functions, they strongly perceived themselves as being highly involved in their children's educational lives. These families appeared to be quite strategic in their choice of involvement; **they saw the transmission of a work ethic as their way of being involved in their child's education.** Parents participating in the case study recognized traditional forms of involvement (attending PTA meetings, parent-teacher contact, volunteering at school functions) as noteworthy, but did not necessarily see them as important forms of involvement that would make an impact on their children's academic development.*

The families of the migrant children had a positive influence on their children's learning, though they did not commonly attend school functions. Unfortunately, too often schools do not recognize and honor different ways families are involved in their children's learning. It is important for school leaders and staff to redefine their vision of family involvement, and to recognize other forms of family involvement that go beyond those commonly associated with middle class, predominately white schools.

Dr. Steve Constantino, founder of Family Friendly Schools and former principal of Time Magazine's School of the Year, describes his organization's definition of family engagement in this way:

In the past five years, the term family engagement has emerged in the research to expand the categories of adults responsible for the lives of children and to understand that engaging families means to provide specific educational information so that they may support and become a real partner in their children's learning. (Source: www.familyfriendlyschools.com)

Dr. Karen Mapp (2007) expands the traditional definition of parent/family involvement by placing different school and family connections on a continuum:

- **Family Involvement**
Participation in school-based, school-sponsored activities and events:
 - Open house
 - Parent/teacher nights
 - Sports events
 - Workshops

- **Family Engagement**
Encouraging parent decision making:
 - Active participation in decision-making committees
 - Interviewed via school surveys and/or focus groups
 - Included in major decisions for the school and district

- **Family Empowerment**
Promoting parent leadership:
 - Advocacy
 - Organizing
 - Social capital enhancement
 - Political capital enhancement

How can we achieve effective school, family and community partnerships?

Evidence across studies show the most important aspect to successfully connect schools, families and communities to improve student learning is to **build effective relationships**.

To partner: Implies a relationship, frequently between two people, in which each has equal status and a certain independence but also implicit or formal obligations to the other or others.

The keys to building effective partnerships:

- Create programs and initiatives focused on developing trusting, respectful and meaningful relationships among school staff, families and community members
- Engage diverse families by recognizing, respecting and addressing cultural and class differences
- Develop a school culture that encourages involvement and addresses specific parental and community needs

Effective school initiatives that successfully engage families to improve student learning are relational in nature and are based on mutual caring and trust.

The more the relationship between families and the school is a real partnership, the more student achievement increases. When schools engage families in ways that are linked to improve student learning, students make greater gains. When families are engaged in positive ways, rather than labeled as problems, schools can be transformed from places where only certain students prosper to one where all children do well. (Henderson, Mapp, Johnson & Davies, 2007)

One process that describes how schools successfully develop a culture that honors and validates parents as true partners in children's educational development that results in improved student learning is called *The Joining Process*. (Mapp, 2003)

The Joining Process: Welcoming, Honoring and Connecting with Families

Welcoming

Families are made to feel at home, comfortable and a part of the school community.

- School facilities are welcoming with helpful signs and open entryways.
- Staff, parents and visitors greet each other in genuinely friendly ways.
- School leaders, staff and parent groups are easily accessible.

Honoring

Family members are genuinely respected and affirmed for any type of involvement or contribution they make.

- The school community has a philosophy of true partnership, where power is shared.
- Parents are given a real voice in governance, with representation from a diverse group of families.
- The school solicits and listens to ideas and is responsive to diverse needs such as those of working or limited English speaking families.

Connecting

School staff and families put children at the center and connect on education issues of common interest designed to improve educational opportunities for the children.

- School programs and events are linked to improved student learning and equip parents with skills on how to help their children learn at home.
- Families know that school staff care about their students and have high expectation for learning.

- School staff develop relationships with families by engaging in ongoing, meaningful communication through frequent phone calls and home visits.

Developing powerful and effective connections between schools, families and communities is hard work. Yet, time and time again, studies demonstrate schools across America are able to reach beyond their boundaries to successfully link with families and community groups to better the educational outcomes of all children. Successful engagement initiatives focused on improving student learning and developing meaningful relationships with family and community partners can achieve great results. Developing a school system and culture that expects, supports and sustains family and community connections to improve student achievement takes time but is well-worth the investment.

For more detailed information about the research studies and findings included this research brief, contact Lou Ann DeMarie at the Iowa School Boards Foundation, ldemarie@ia-sb.org, (515) 288-1991 or 1-800-795-4272 or visit the Iowa Statewide Parent Information Resource Center (PIRC) Web site at www.iowaparents.org

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