

# Mercyhurst College Civic Institute



## Parent Involvement Literature Review

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## **Introduction**

As early as the 1970s, researchers stressed the importance of parent involvement. Pena (2000) summarized previous research noting the advantages of parent involvement for not only students, but also schools and parents. The student advantages include enhanced achievement, increased positive behaviors and emotional development (Pena, 2000). Schools with higher levels of parent involvement tend to outperform schools without higher levels involvement. Parent involvement improves the school-community relationship while increasing teacher efficacy. These schools also have an increase in volunteer time and more school support from parents. Parents who become involved at their children's school have better attitudes and help to support school activities. Their involvement also helps to increase communication between parents and their children (Pena, 2000).

Recent legislation, The Goals 2000: Educate America Act, has made parent involvement a priority for schools across the nation. This Act, a reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) encourages the nation's school districts, "to reexamine their parent involvement policies and programs and to demonstrate innovative initiatives in order to obtain federal education funding" (Kessler-Sklar & Baker, 2000). As noted by Kessler-Sklar and Baker (2000), one example is that eligibility for Title 1 money now requires the development of school-family compacts. In order for a district to receive ESEA money, at least one percent of the money must be set aside for parent involvement programs (Kessler-Sklar & Baker, 2000). In the survey of 200 school districts by Kessler-Sklar and Baker (2000), they found that the two most common parent involvement practices included: communicating with parents about their children's progress and school programs, as well as providing parents with the opportunity to be decision makers regarding school policies and practices.

## **Barriers to Parent Involvement**

When creating parent involvement policies or programs, schools face several barriers to involvement for parents including specific barriers for culturally or linguistically diverse (CDL) and lower socioeconomic (SES) parents. Several researchers (Flood, Lapp, Tinajero, Nagel, 1995; Geenan & Powers, 2001; Pena, 2000; Quezada, Diaz, Sanchez, 2003) note the barriers faced by parents of all ethnicities and socioeconomic statuses including: minimal opportunities for involvement, transportation, childcare, language, limited educational background, and limited knowledge of school policies and practices. Researchers (Pena, 2000 & 1994; Geenan & Powers, 2001; Pena, 2000 & 1994; Quezada, Diaz, Sanchez, 2003) also focus on barriers for CDL and lower SES parents such as: education level, feeling threatened by the authority of teachers, the inability to speak/understand English, and lack of transportation and childcare. Geenan and Powers (2001) explain that barriers for involvement are more formidable for CDL parents because of the racism, discrimination, insensitivity, and cultural unresponsiveness they often face.

## **Recommendations for Parent Involvement**

After identifying the barriers, researchers also offer recommendations for overcoming the barriers and increasing parent involvement. Flood, Lapp, Tinajero, and Nagel (1995) suggest having parents involved directly in the classroom by assisting with tutoring; supporting written communication; promoting after-school study; or sharing personal stories, literature, events, or ideas. Flood et al. (1995) suggest that at home parents can share books, family memories, oral histories, or journals with their children. According to Sheldon (2002), it is important to connect

isolated parents with other parents. Sheldon (2002) also recommends the creation of phone trees in each grade level to connect parents to each other.

Specifically addressing the barriers faced by CDL parents, Quezada, Diaz, and Sanchez (2003) and Pena (1994) recommend: making parents feel welcome; sending information home in more than one language; offering flexible schedules based on input from parents; and offering transportation and childcare. Other suggestions from Quezada, Diaz, and Sanchez (2003) included making home visits; asking for parent ideas for workshops or trainings; conducting meetings in more than one language when necessary; and planning meetings outside of school as social events. Other suggestions noted by Pena (1994) included: creating telephone trees; having an open-door policy; and planning a range of activities for involvement including in the home and at the school.

### **School, Family, and Community Partnerships**

Creating a school, family and community partnership can help to “improve school programs and school climate, provide family services and support, increase parents’ skills and leadership, connect families with others in the school and in the community, and help teachers with their work” (Epstein, 1995). More importantly a partnership can help students to succeed. Epstein (1995) summarizes important findings from various surveys and field studies regarding partnerships between schools, families, and communities: first, partnerships tend to decline across grade levels, unless schools work to implement partnership practices at all grade levels; second, affluent communities have more positive family involvement on average, unless schools in lower socioeconomic communities work to build positive family partnerships; third, schools in lower socioeconomic communities tend to only contact parents when their children are having

problems, unless they work to also contact parents about positive achievements; and finally, single parents, parents working outside of the home, parents who live a far distance from the school, and fathers tend to be less involved at schools, unless the school has opportunities for these parents to volunteer at varying times and places. Epstein (1995) also notes: first, almost all families want their children to succeed and would like to have more information from schools in order to continue as a partner in their children's education; second, almost all school personnel would like to help families become more involved, but are not sure how to create the necessary programs and are often fearful about trying; and third, almost all students want their families to be partners in their education experiences and are willing to help with communications between the school and the family.

### **Epstein's Six Types of Involvement**

Understanding the importance of partnerships, Epstein created a framework of involvement that can help schools to develop partnership programs. The six types of involvement defined by Epstein (1995) are: (1) Parenting, help families create an environment that encourages students; (2) Communicating, use effective forms of communication between school and home regarding school activities and student progress; (3) Volunteering, increase and organize parent support; (4) Learning at home, provide parents with information on how to help their children with homework; (5) Decision making, include parents in school decision making by creating parent leaders and representatives; and (6) Collaborating, combining community services and resources with school programs. For each type of involvement, Epstein (1995) offers suggestions for sample practices of partnership, challenges that need to be met, and redefinitions of traditional partnership terms in order to reach out to more families.

### ***Parenting***

According to Epstein (1995) the sample practices that fall under the parenting category include providing workshops and video-tapes on parenting, parent education courses, family support programs, and home visits during transition points to preschool, elementary, or middle school. One challenge for schools addressing parenting is to provide information to all families, not just those who attend school activities. Also, it is important to make sure that information provided is linked to their children's success in school. Redefinition of the term workshop to mean making information available in many forms that can be viewed anytime can help schools reach out to more families (Epstein 1995).

### ***Communicating***

Samples of communicating include parent conferences; language translators to assist families; folders of school work sent home regularly; regular use of memos, phone calls, and newsletters; clear information on school activities, policies, and reforms (Epstein 1995). Epstein (1995) noted several challenges for schools such as reviewing the quality, clarity, and frequency of memos and other communications; taking into consideration parents who do not speak English or cannot read well; and opening communication between the home and school. One way to increase communicating is by redefining communications about school activities and student progress to mean creating many channels of communication that can connect schools, families, and the community (Epstein, 1995).

### ***Volunteering***

As noted by Epstein (1995), volunteering includes practices such as: classroom volunteer programs; family centers for parent resources or meetings; postcard surveys to determine best times and activities for volunteers; and telephone trees to provide information when necessary.

For this type of involvement, schools are challenged to recruit volunteers in a way that all families feel needed and welcome; to create flexible schedules for activities; and to organize volunteer work by providing training (Epstein 1995). Epstein (1995) suggested redefinition of volunteer is a person who supports the school and student learning at any time in anyway, inside and outside of the school building.

### ***Learning at Home***

Sample practices addressing learning at home include: providing information on the skills required for each grade level; information on homework policies; information on how to help students with homework; and family reading, math, or science activities at the school (Epstein 1995). The challenges facing schools initiating programs to increase parent involvement in learning at home are to create a regular schedule of interactive homework for parents and students and to involve both parents and students in curriculum decisions (Epstein 1995). Epstein suggests that the definition of homework not only include work done individually but also interactively and that help at home means “encouraging, listening, reacting, praising, guiding, monitoring, and discussing not ‘teaching’ school subjects” (Epstein 1995).

### ***Decision Making***

The involvement type of decision-making is reflected in practices such as: parent organizations, councils, and committees; and advocacy groups that work for reform (Epstein 1995). The challenges for this type of involvement discussed by Epstein (1995) include: involving parents of all races, ethnicities, and socioeconomic statuses as well as students in decision-making groups. Epstein (1995) presents two redefinitions for this type of involvement: (1) decision-making, meaning a partnership of shared actions toward mutual goals and (2) parent leader, meaning a representative who communicates with other families.

### ***Collaborating with Community***

The final type of involvement, collaborating with community, includes practices such as: providing families with information on community programs and services; completing community service activities by the school, students, and families; and involving school alumni in programs for students (Epstein 1995). Epstein's (1995) challenges for schools in this area include: solving "turf" issues for collaborative activities; providing families with information on community programs for students; and ensuring that all students and families can take part or obtain the community programs or services. The redefinition in this area focuses on the meaning of community stressing that it should include any neighborhoods that influence learning and all people interested in the quality of education whether or not they have a child in the school (Epstein 1995).

### **Conclusion**

The National Network of Partnership School at John Hopkins University, states that they "work with members of the Network to encourage, inform, recognize, and support efforts to improve and maintain school, family, and community connections that produce positive results for students" (National Network of Partnership Schools). This website offers a variety of resources on its "links" page and publications for schools including Promising Partnership Practices collections with sample activities being used at different network schools that cover each of the six types of involvement. By identifying the barriers to parent involvement, schools can begin to implement solutions based on the aforementioned recommendations from research and Epstein's framework for involvement and begin to increase parent involvement and ultimately student success.

## References

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