

Improving Family and Community Involvement in Secondary Schools

By Joyce L. Epstein

Educators at all school levels know that successful students—at all ability levels—have families who stay informed and involved in their children's education. Yet many middle level and high school teachers report that the only time they contact families is when students are in trouble. This disconnect between knowledge and behavior can be corrected with new approaches that make it possible for every school to organize an excellent partnership program.

The Research

Studies are accumulating that show that family involvement through high school is important for student success. The growing literature yields three main conclusions:

- Parents want more and better information to guide their students through middle level and high school
- Students benefit from family and community involvement in high school
- Educators in middle level and high schools must take responsibility for developing goal-linked partnership programs that reach all families and that help students succeed.

More and Better Information

Almost all parents value education, but most say that they want and need more information about adolescent development, middle level and high school programs and options, graduation requirements, college and career planning, and community programs for teens. They want to know how to help their teens develop their talents, meet high school requirements, and plan for the future.

Only some parents—mainly those with more formal education—independently become involved in their children's middle level or high school education (Catsambis, 2001). Other parents struggle because they lack information or assume that their children need less supervision than they did in elementary school. There are, however, important family and community involvement activities that help teens achieve their best in school (Moore, Guzman, Hair, Lippman, & Garrett, 2004).



PREVIEW

Successful students have families that are involved in their education, although few families are likely to become involved without encouragement.

Effective partnership programs are planned, evaluated, and improved, just as excellent academic programs are.

Guidelines from the National Network of Partnership Schools help schools create effective connections.



PROMISING PRACTICES

From the National Network of Partnership Schools

Strengthening Literacy Skills

Col. E. Brooke Lee Middle School in Silver Spring, MD, conducted a series of family and community involvement activities focused on improving students' literacy skills. Students recorded how many hours they read; earned incentives; obtained library cards; discussed books with guest readers from the community; and participated in Family Reading Week, during which they and their family members read together and earned gift cards for reaching major reading benchmarks. During Young Reader's Day, local sports and news media celebrities, police officers, community members, and parents came to the school to read with sixth-grade students.

Student-Led Conferences

West Carrollton Middle School in Ohio guides students in conducting parent-student-teacher conferences after the first and second report card periods. Students present a portfolio of their work and discuss their progress and their goals for the academic year. Families receive invitations and sign-up sheets by mail. Students work with their teachers to prepare their portfolios, assess their progress, and set their goals for the next quarter and practice conducting their conference with classmates. Parent participation in the conferences has grown from 30% to 78% and continues to improve.

Increasing Volunteers

At Kickemuit Middle School in Warren, RI, family involvement was lagging because of a language barrier between the school and a large number of Portuguese-speaking families. To increase school-family partnerships, the school's action team for partnerships surveyed teachers to determine how volunteers might help them and the school. Parents indicated their interests, talents, and availability on a parent survey that had English and Portuguese translations. A parent volunteer coordinator identified room parents for all homerooms and used the survey results to match teachers' requests with parents' time and talents.

Celebrating Student Achievement

New Horizons, an alternative high school in Pasco, WA, held an assembly to honor students with a 3.0 or higher GPA. Speakers encouraged ongoing parental support for students. An honor roll bulletin board was created to publicly display students' achievements. The activity built bridges with families and

Family and community involvement plans and programs result in more parents from all socioeconomic, racial, cultural, and linguistic backgrounds becoming involved with their teens in discussions and decisions about school and making plans for postsecondary education and training. Without such programs, many adolescents are left with an incomplete support system on school matters.

Benefits From Involvement

When middle level and high schools implement partnership programs, more students benefit than just those whose families become involved. Studies confirm that when families are involved, more students earn higher grades in English and math, improve their reading and writing skills, complete more course credits, set higher aspirations, have better attendance, come to class more prepared to learn, and have fewer behavioral problems (Catsambis & Beveridge, 2001; Hill et al., 2004, Simon, 2004). Further, when schools have programs and activities to engage families, more parents become involved in useful ways. For example:

- When high schools conducted workshops on postsecondary planning, more parents responded by discussing college and career plans with their teens (Simon, 2004).
- When middle level schools organized interactive homework in science, more families talked with students about science and students' improved their homework completion, report card grades, and achievement test scores (Van Voorhis, 2003). In high school, family involvement in and support of reading is linked to student success in that subject (Parcel & Dufur, 2001).
- When educators communicated clearly with families about attendance policies and how attendance affected report card grades, schools' average daily attendance improved and chronic absenteeism declined (Epstein & Sheldon, 2002; Sheldon, in press).
- When teachers and administrators communicated with parents about student behavior, the number of disciplinary actions in schools decreased over time (Seidman, Lambert, Allen, & Aber, 2003; Sheldon & Epstein, 2002).

The results of these studies are significant, even after accounting for school level, parents' education, neighborhood characteristics, and students' prior achievements.

Partnership Programs

Parents' wishes for more useful information and teachers' hopes for more successful students require effective partnership programs that are developed the same way that excellent academic programs are planned, evaluated, and improved over time. Research and field work with hundreds of elementary, middle level, and high schools across the country reveal four key components of effective and sustainable programs of family and community involvement (Epstein et al., 2002).

Action teams for partnerships. Teachers, administrators, parents, community partners, and sometimes students serve as a committee

or “action arm” of the school improvement team. The action team is responsible for improving a program of family and community involvement linked to school improvement goals.

The six types of involvement framework. By selecting activities that focus on parenting, communicating, volunteering, learning at home, decision making, and collaborating with the community, schools can help all parents become involved in different ways.

Action plans that are linked to goals for student success. Annual written plans for family and community involvement are linked to the school improvement plan and to specific goals for student learning and development. By writing a plan and implementing activities, the action team ensures that teachers will not be working alone to help students reach important results.

Evaluation and ongoing improvement. By documenting and assessing the quality of activities that are implemented, the action team can continually improve outreach to more families and success for more students. Only sustained programs will have an impact because school communities have new parents, students, and teachers each year.

Using the Framework

In the National Network of Partnership Schools (NNPS) at Johns Hopkins University, more than 150 school districts and 1,000 schools—including more than 350 schools with middle level and high school grades—are implementing the four key components. Middle level and high schools in the network are using the six types of involvement to focus on goals for student success. The framework helps schools identify ways that families and community partners can be involved without always having to come to meetings at the school building (Epstein et al., 2002; Sanders, 2005). With these guidelines, schools can create programs that enable all parents to remain engaged with their teens and their schools.

Type 1: Parenting. Parenting activities help families understand adolescent development, strengthen parenting skills to relate to and support teens, and set home conditions for learning through high school. Type 1 activities also help schools understand families’ cultures, backgrounds, and goals for their children. Examples include workshops for parents on age-appropriate topics of health, nutrition, peer pressure, drug use, and premature sexual behavior. Parent-to-parent forums may help families ease students’ transitions from middle level to high school.

Type 2: Communicating. Two-way communicating activities keep families informed about and involved in school programs and students’ progress. Examples include student-led parent-teacher-student conferences; information for families on changing report cards; a column for parents’ questions and answers in the school newsletter; and principals’ breakfasts on key topics, such as graduation requirements, college and career planning, and state standards and tests that affect middle level and high school programs and students’ progress.

Type 3: Volunteering. Activities that facilitate volunteerism improve

increased the confidence of students who did not have a history of success in their original schools.

Understanding High School

North High School in Eau Claire, WI, developed a year-long transition program to welcome freshmen and their families. During the summer, students visited the school and received letters from the principal, a partnership coordinator, and an English teacher that discussed the importance of parental involvement and programs for freshmen. Families and students attended a family picnic to meet with educators and other parents, discuss the start of school and their questions, receive a handbook and binder for organizing student information, and register for an online service for parents to access student information. Back-to-school nights for families and parent-student-teacher conferences provided more information and reinforced the connection of home and school.

Planning for College and Work

The action team and guidance department at Naperville North High School in Illinois collaborated to produce a college and career planning guide that included information on searching for a college, filling out applications, taking entrance exams, making college visits, and asking questions of college admissions staff members; guidelines for writing essays; and information about financial aid.

The action team at Mullins High School in South Carolina conducted a financial aid workshop for parents and students. A local college financial aid adviser helped design and conduct the workshop.

Students and parents at Max S. Hayes Vocational High School in Cleveland, OH, attended a one-day symposium to learn about career preparation, interview techniques, health issues, and other topics concerning life after high school graduation. Speakers from community-based organizations shared their expertise and answered students’ and parents’ questions.

For information on these and other family and community involvement activities in middle level and high schools, visit the Web site of the National Network of Partnership Schools, www.partnershipschools.org, and click on Success Stories. Go to the annual collections of Promising Partnership Practices and search by school level.

REACHING ALL FAMILIES

Schools must not only plan and implement effective practices for all six types of involvement that are linked to age-appropriate goals but also involve more parents each year. In schools across the country, action teams for partnership are developing, adapting, and sharing strategies that ensure that their partnership programs:

- Use high-tech and low-tech solutions to get information to parents who cannot come to the school for meetings and workshops
- Encourage two-way communications
- Make communications understandable for all families, including parents who have less formal education or who do not speak English
- Reinforce students' roles in their own education and as connectors of home and school
- Arrange flexible time for volunteers to help schools and students, and recognize volunteers who serve as audiences for students' activities
- Develop interactive homework assignments
- Provide timely information on course choices and special programs
- Ensure that leadership roles are filled by parent representatives from all major racial and ethnic groups, socioeconomic groups, and neighborhoods served by the school
- Determine whether community organizations or the school will direct and fund each activity
- Link students' learning experiences in the community to the school curriculum and build on part-time employment and service learning.

Studies show that schools are more likely to involve all families if they already have a foundation of teaming, annual written plans, and strong support for partnership programs from the principal (Sheldon, in press; Van Voorhis & Sheldon, 2004).

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the recruitment, training, and schedules of volunteer stakeholders at the school or in other locations (e.g., home, business, community) to support student activities and school programs. Activities include scheduling time for parents to talk to students about their careers, hobbies, and talents; training parents and other volunteers as mentors, tutors, and coaches; guiding volunteers to assist in specific school locations and with special activities and fairs; and identifying parents to serve as neighborhood representatives, translators, and interpreters.

Type 4: Learning at home. Learning-at-home activities are designed for students and their families and are coordinated with the students' classwork and curricula. Examples include interactive homework designed by teachers that helps students to discuss their work and ideas with family members, academic and personal goal setting for report cards each marking period with input from families on strategies for reaching goals, student-led home conferences using portfolios of their work, and guidelines for parents for providing home support for students who need extra help to pass courses.

Type 5: Decision making. Decision-making activities include families' voices in developing mission statements and in designing, reviewing, and improving school policies that affect students and families. Students and parents should be active participants on school improvement teams, committees, councils, parent-teacher organizations, and the like. Examples include parent representatives on the school's action team for partnerships; an active parent organization; parent and student representatives on school improvement committees (e.g., curriculum, safety, codes of behavior, student parking, partnerships, fundraising, and postsecondary planning committees); and training to develop good representatives who obtain ideas from and give information to constituents.

Type 6: Collaborating with the community. Collaborating-with-the-community activities draw upon and coordinate the resources of businesses; cultural, civic, and religious organizations; senior citizen groups; colleges and universities; government agencies; and other associations to strengthen school programs, family practices, and student learning and development. Other activities in this category enable students, staff members, and families to become engaged in community service or projects that contribute to the community. Examples include creating directories that help students and their families identify after-school recreation, tutorial programs, health services, cultural events, service opportunities, summer programs, and part-time jobs and obtaining "gold card" discounts for local businesses as incentives for students to improve attendance or grades or to reward other accomplishments.

Taking Action

In a recent survey of secondary school teachers, 97% noted that working with parents is one of their biggest challenges, and just about everyone surveyed believed that parental involvement was important (Markow & Scheer, 2005). Principals can improve their schools by sharing leadership and supporting teamwork to develop and sustain effective pro-

PRINCIPALS' ROLES

in Supporting Partnership Programs

grams of school, family, and community partnerships.

Many schools are using these new, research-based approaches to turn what educators considered an overwhelming challenge into a systematic approach for partnership program development. The results are encouraging when secondary schools discover that the connections of home, school, and community count for student success. **PL**

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- Let teachers, staff members, parents, students, and the community know that the school is all about partnerships, and that all partners will work together to help all students succeed.
- At the first faculty meeting each year, stress the action team's mission, the importance of teamwork, and the expectations for all faculty members to participate in and conduct some family and community involvement activities. Generate excitement about activities.
- Tell students how important their families are to their education and reinforce the message often. Also, explain that they are the main actors in their own education and the key communicators and connectors between school and home.
- Allocate funds for partnership activities. Funds may come from federal, state, and local programs that include family and community involvement and from general district and school funds for school improvement.
- Publicize activities throughout the school year. Encourage participation and recognize the leaders, participants, and results.
- Guide the action team in making periodic reports to the school council, the faculty, the parent organization, the local media, and key community groups.
- Work with district administrators and principals from other schools to arrange professional development; share ideas; solve challenges; and improve school, family, and community partnerships. This includes transitioning activities.
- Work with community groups and leaders to locate resources that will enrich the curriculum and students' learning experiences.
- Thank everyone who gave their time and contributed to involvement activities. Encourage their continued support for the next school year.

Source: 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 Press.

THE NATIONAL NETWORK OF PARTNERSHIP SCHOOLS (NNPS)

Middle level and high schools in the National Network of Partnership Schools (NNPS) at Johns Hopkins University are focusing family and community involvement activities on important, age-appropriate goals for student success, including:

- Achievement in specific subjects and cocurricular activities
- Health (e.g., improvement of nutrition, health services, physical fitness, and mental health)
- Attendance (e.g., increased on-time attendance; attention to chronic absence and lateness)
- Behavior (e.g., transitions, reduction of bullying, improved behavior in class and other school locations)
- Postsecondary planning (e.g., understanding high school graduation requirements, available postsecondary paths, consequences of course choices, requirements for college admission)
- Sustaining a welcoming school climate for family and community involvement.

Schools in NNPS learn how to use an action team approach and a research-based framework of six types of involvement. Each school community tailors its plans and practices to address its specific goals, needs, and interests.

Visit the NNPS Web site, www.partnershipschools.org, for research briefs; annual collections of promising practices from schools, districts, and states across the country; descriptions of award-winning partnership programs; and instructions for how to join the network.



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TITLE: Connections Count

SOURCE: Principal Leadership (High Sch Ed) 8 no2 O 2007

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