

IMPROVING PARENT INVOLVEMENT IN SCHOOLS: A CULTURAL PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract

Academic standards for students are increasing. Both parents and teachers have a significant role to play in helping children succeed in school. However, parental involvement in their children's education is on the decline (Coleman, 1991). Identifying factors that contribute to this decline will enable schools to better understand the reasons and help them develop ways of increasing parent participation. When addressing the issue of parental involvement it is necessary to define what actually constitutes involvement, and examine the perspectives of parents, teachers, and administrators alike. Parents most often care deeply about their children's education and are not unwilling to help; sometimes they just don't know how, or are intimidated by schools and school personnel. Cultural beliefs, socio-economic status, and parents' own experiences in school all influence their views on parent involvement. Most teachers have not been formally trained in working with parents and may view parents' lack of participation as disinterest when most likely that is not the case. This literature review looks at the many obstacles that must be overcome by all parties to improve parental involvement and how identification and education of both parents and teachers will increase parent involvement and ultimately student achievement.

1. INTRODUCTION

It is no secret that parent involvement improves student achievement (as cited in Lazar, 1999, p. 206). Yet research shows that parent participation is on the decline. With the demands placed upon schools by the *No Child Left Behind* Legislation, it is more important than ever for students to make progress. If involving parents will help in this endeavor, all schools should be making an effort to work collaboratively with parents to ultimately improve student achievement. Understanding the obstacles parents and teachers face when it comes to working together for the benefit of the student will make it easier to determine how those obstacles can be overcome. Effectively involving parents means that schools must acknowledge the diversities of their populations and be mindful of the varying perspectives regarding involvement associated with those diversities.

The Link between Parent Involvement and Achievement

Parent involvement can mean different things to different people. A recent newsletter published by The Center for Comprehensive School Reform and Improvement states "Some equate involvement with chaperoning field trips or volunteering for PTA committees. Others define it (parent involvement) as attendance at an open house or signing homework folders" (September 2006). The *No Child Left Behind Act* (2002) considers parental involvement to mean "the participation of parents in regular, two-way, and meaningful communication involving student academic learning and other school activities," and puts

the onus on schools to be certain that parent involvement initiatives are developed and evaluated yearly. Section 1118 (E) states that schools must:

- (E) conduct, with the involvement of parents, an annual evaluation of the content and effectiveness of the parental involvement policy in improving the academic quality of the schools served under this part, including identifying barriers to greater participation by parents in activities authorized by this section (*with particular attention to parents who are economically disadvantaged, are disabled, have limited English proficiency, have limited literacy, or are of any racial or ethnic minority background*), and use the findings of such evaluation to design strategies for more effective parental involvement, and to revise, if necessary, the parental involvement policies described in this section.

Student achievement is about more than grades. Attendance, students' attitudes toward school, student behavior, and drop-out rate all play a role in student achievement. In a recent report by the National School Public Relations Association, results showed "that improved parental involvement leads to higher academic achievement, better attendance, and improved behavior at home and school" (Padgett, p. 44). These two concepts go hand-in-hand. So why aren't all schools willing to involve parents, and why are parents reluctant to get involved?

Barriers to Parent Involvement

Lazar and Slostad (1999) believe that "parents care very much about the educational needs of their children," and that negative perceptions of parents persist because "schools of education have not adequately educated teachers to understand parents and to network with them" (p. 207). Foster and Loven share that a central explanation that researchers are finding is that "very little attention is given to preparing teachers to work with parents and other adults" (as cited in Lazar, 1999, p. 207). Lazar & Slostad (1999) conclude that parents' perceptions of their role in their children's education are often shaped by their own schooling experience, their current circumstances, and cultural beliefs. "U. S. Immigrant parents, who are often dealing with culture shock, may see the school as a foreign environment which they choose to avoid" (as cited in Tinkler, 2002, p. 11).

Indeed, there are many barriers to parent participation. According to Karen Mapp, education lecturer at the Harvard Graduate School of Education, "Factors such as cultural, racial, and economic differences between school staff and parents can lead to incorrect assumptions and stereotyping on both sides" (1997). Too often schools are quick to dismiss parents' seeming indifference as not caring when, in fact, according to Lazar and Slostad, "the ways parents view their roles is shaped by the circumstances and norms of particular cultures" and "their beliefs about their own effectiveness as teachers or tutors" (1999, p. 208). In Latino culture for example, "teachers are highly respected and any interference from parents may be considered rude and disrespectful" (Tinkler, 2002). Schools must be acutely aware of the customs and beliefs of the various populations they service if they are to truly work collaboratively for the benefit of the students.

There are those who blame the lack of parent involvement on the decline of "family." In his article *Family meltdown in the classroom*, author Karl Zinsmeister quotes Samuel Sava, executive director of the National Association of Elementary School Principals; "The family revolution is the greatest single cause of the decline in student achievement during the last twenty years" (1996). Zinsmeister maintains that due to the rise in single-parent households and the breakdown of marriage, "children receive less

care and oversight from their parents” (1996). He contends that teachers are overloaded, and that the burden of raising children is being placed on schools, with less time spent teaching core subjects and more time spent teaching things traditionally left to parents, like personal guidance and ethical instruction. He believes that the trend in public education has been to “convert schools into full-service social-service agencies, where children get their meals, their doctoring, their social and racial integration, their after-hours babysitting, their driving instruction, their indoctrination in multicultural thinking, their drug treatment, their moral training, and their condoms” (1996). If indeed this is the case, it is more important than ever to find ways to connect with and involve even the busiest of parents.

There are further obstacles to overcome if we are to truly engage parents in their children’s education. Even the most willing parents sometimes just don’t know *how* to get involved, and issues such as “schedules, lack of transportation, and language and cultural differences can keep parents from meetings and school events” (Padgett).

Overcoming Obstacles to Lack of Parent Involvement

Schools can do many things to encourage parent participation. Education journalist Leon Lynn states, in an edition of *The Harvard Education Letter*, that “a teacher must be able to make good use of families’ expertise and resources, at the same time reaching out to families to support them” (1997). He believes that “to succeed at building parent involvement, teachers need professional development experience that prepare them for the task, just as they need preparation in subject matter and teaching skills” (1997). This effort is further supported by students themselves. At the fifth annual national student conference of the Minority Student Achievement Network (MSAN), high achieving minority students made recommendations for raising minority achievement. Their suggestions echo what experts in the field have been saying for years, and two of those suggestions speak directly to parents and teachers and what they can do to improve achievement; “increase teacher training on the needs of minority students, and develop programs for parents so that they can learn about the situations that affect their children’s lives at school and become more involved” (2005).

The National School Public Relations Association (NSPRA) has some specific suggestions to help schools and homes work together “in a collaborative and competent approach to education” (Padgett). These include creating a formal policy to help outline specific goals for parents and teachers working together, identifying barriers specific to the school and its culture, assessing and evaluating and improving the current programs, and involving the community at large. Schools must make parents feel welcome. In Boston, the Patrick O’Hearn School’s Family Outreach Program enlists the help of current parents to visit and welcome new families. After interviewing 20 parents whose children attended the Patrick O’Hearn Elementary School, Karen Mapp states that one parent’s comments “reveal that allowing her to connect to the school community in her own way and on her terms created an atmosphere of recognition and inclusion that were important elements in cultivating her involvement” (1997). The school also has a family center “where parents can go to enjoy refreshments and conversations with other parents and attend workshops and forums on educational topics” (Mapp, 1997). Mapp believes that it is the personal connections with school staff that makes the difference (1997). These types of “joining” activities help develop trusting relationships between families and school.

Whose responsibility is it to get parents involved? Schools must take the initiative to enlist the help of parents in all aspects of their children’s education. Looking at their own school’s community and determining the challenges and strengths that lie within, schools can develop plans to increase parental involvement and in doing so ultimately improve student achievement.

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