

## **Congressional Briefing November 10, 2009**

**Sponsored by the National Association of School Psychologists, in cooperation with Senator Lincoln (AR), Senator Cochran (MS), Representative Loeb sack (IA-2), and Representative Ehlers (MI-3)**

### ***Positive School Climate, Student Wellness, and Improved Academic Outcomes: Bringing Out the Best in Students and Schools***

#### **Remarks by Kathleen Minke, PhD, NCSP**

Good morning. My name is Kathleen Minke and I am Acting Director of the School of Education at the University of Delaware and President-Elect of the National Association of School Psychologists. I am most appreciative of the opportunity to speak with you this morning. Meeting the needs of the whole child is critical to bringing out the best in schools and students. It is encouraging that Congress is seriously considering these issues for inclusion in federal education policy and law. Thank you again to Senators Lincoln and Cochran, Representatives Loeb sack and Ehlers, and their staffs for helping to lead this effort.

I have had the privilege of being a school psychologist for 25 years, working with kids, families, and schools in four states. For most of my career, I have been engaged in the study of the connections between families and schools. This work has shown me the powerful influence positive relationships between families and educators can have on students' school success. When schools reach out and successfully engage families, children do better academically and socially.

Family-school collaboration, and other factors contributing to positive, competent schools and students, are not ancillary to the mission of education but are central to it. They also are tightly intertwined, both relying on and contributing to each other. And, although it may feel counterintuitive, positive environments and partnerships do not occur—and are certainly not sustained—by happenstance. They require intentionality, training, commitment, and monitoring.

Moreover, it is the responsibility of schools to reach out to families and begin the process of developing these partnerships. This is as central an obligation as ongoing school improvement. In fact, it is a key feature of successful schools.

When parents and other caregivers are engaged in their children's education, there are substantial benefits for children, families, and schools (Christenson & Sheridan, 2001). Children whose parents are engaged show more positive attitudes toward school, do better with homework, and show higher achievement in reading than similar children whose parents are not engaged. Parents and other caregivers become more confident of their ability to help their children succeed and they develop more positive views of teachers and schools.

Importantly, there is growing evidence of a connection between parent engagement and academic achievement, even after accounting for variables like socioeconomic status. That is, when parents are engaged in education, they are more likely to have higher expectations and aspirations for their children. These beliefs can influence children's engagement and effort at school, resulting in higher achievement.

Effective partnerships contribute to creating bonds between the student and the school. These bonds, in turn, work synergistically with parental expectations to support students' willingness to work hard and take ownership of their own learning. This capacity relates to students' resilience, optimism, and competence.

In addition, effective partnerships serve as a resource for prevention and early intervention. When a child begins experiencing difficulty in school, parents and teachers who have an existing, trusting relationship are in a much better position to problem-solve and intervene effectively than those who either have a conflicted relationship or who don't know each other at all.

And the benefits don't just accrue in students. Teachers who successfully engage parents have higher levels of morale and produce higher achieving students, which in turn contributes to their sense of job satisfaction and purpose. Similarly, effective parent partnerships help to improve the school climate by supporting positive, open communications and creating a more tightly knit parent community in which parents are collectively invested in good outcomes for all students, not just their child. Any administrator will tell you that this vastly improves the ability to get things done.

Despite the benefits of family-school partnerships, productive working relationships between families and schools are difficult to achieve. Some barriers are obvious: speaking different languages, not having transportation to come to school, and so forth. Others are more hidden. For example, families have different expectations of what their roles *should* be with respect to their children's education. Many parents believe that it is not appropriate to participate; they believe it would be disrespectful to teachers to take an active role.

Also, schools often establish the rules of parent involvement in ways that focus only on how parents can assist teachers. Many times there is limited recognition on the part of schools that what we consider to be basic ways in which parents can help (with homework for example) actually require a high degree of resources that many parents simply don't have. The seemingly simple request from a teacher to help with homework is genuinely impossible for many families with whom I've worked. I've worked with parents who have cried when telling me about their efforts to keep their families afloat but whose second and sometimes third jobs kept them from being available during homework time.

In these kinds of situations, when parents do not respond as expected by educators, there is an unfortunate and unwarranted assumption that these families simply don't care and efforts to reach out to them end. In my work over two decades, from extremely challenging urban schools to very poor rural communities, I have never met a parent who didn't want her child to succeed at school. Never. Similarly, I have never met a teacher who did not wish for positive effective relationships with the families of their students. Unfortunately, I have seen many times when parents and teachers did not understand each other's perspectives and got stuck in unproductive cycles of blaming and disengagement.

Although the barriers are significant, there are reasons for optimism. One reason is that research shows that educators *can*, in fact, influence the development of partnerships with families across diverse cultures and situations. For example, parents' perception that the teacher is inviting them to participate is a powerful influence on their behavior. The most influential invitations are personal (not newsletters) and relate specifically to their individual child's learning.

I could go on for a while about what we know makes for effective engagement, but there is a problem that you should recognize. Teachers and principals typically receive little training in how to effectively engage with families. Educators need good communication skills, problem-solving skills, and conflict resolution skills in order to work productively with families. These skills do not develop by accident. They need to be explicitly taught, nurtured, and encouraged.

Fortunately, school psychologists and other school-based mental health service providers *are* trained in these areas and can help teachers and principals develop them. These professionals can be central players in partnership development and the creation of positive school climates, in addition to providing direct services to individual students. I've worked in schools helping teachers develop these skills. I remember one fourth grade teacher who went from describing her parent-teacher conference experiences as "unbearable" to looking forward to the opportunity to connect with families through these

meetings. It isn't easy, but in my experience, teachers are eager to learn how to improve their relationships with families in order to support children's learning.

Schools professionals have many responsibilities and sometimes seemingly competing demands, but they cannot wait to focus on these issues until "they have the time" to do so. Positive school climate, family partnerships, and student wellness clearly support ongoing academic achievement. They are absolutely critical in times of stress or crisis. Schools that have made these protective factors integral to the school environment are far better equipped to respond to the needs of students and families in times of crisis. Why? Students exist in a supportive, close-knit environment. School personnel are better able to recognize and respond to needs effectively. And families and school personnel are better able to communicate and support each other. This all contributes to sustaining student wellness and academic achievement during difficult times. Figuring this out in the midst of a crisis is neither effective nor wise.

We see this on an individual level when a specific family has a problem, such as a death in the family. We see it on a more global level as we did after Columbine, 9-11, Hurricane Katrina, and the current economic crisis. Sadly, we are also seeing it with our military families and students as the stresses of two wars wear on them. And, the tragic shootings in Fort Hood last week are likely to escalate the needs of some students with active duty parents.

NASP and school psychologists have been supporting the military and their families and their children since the beginning of the war in Afghanistan in 2002. Much of this work revolves around creating systems of support, providing direct intervention, and promoting resilience. The principles of positive psychology being discussed here today are being used quite successfully right now with military families and children. These principles form the foundation of programs like NASP's *Gratitude Works* program and the *Fishful Thinking* program, with which NASP is a partner. I believe Dr. Karen Reivich, creator of *Fishful Thinking*, and her colleague Dr. Martin Seligman at the University of Pennsylvania have been working closely with the military on this effort.

In conclusion, I'd like to emphasize that effective federal policies can help schools do a better job at developing effective and lasting partnerships with families. In a just published book (*Handbook of School-Family Partnerships*, Christenson & Reschly, Eds.), Heather Weiss and Naomi Stephen outline the history of how parent involvement in education has been addressed within federal legislation, beginning in 1965 with the passage of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act. They note that there have been opportunities, backed with federal resources, for schools to develop comprehensive partnership strategies. Unfortunately, relatively little widespread progress has been made. One contributor to this situation (though by no means the only one) is the fragmented nature of federal funding and programming that has had the unintended consequence of what are called silos of family involvement initiatives that are separated by funding streams (one program for Title 1, one program for special education, etc.). It is my hope that you will advocate for policies that provide the flexibility needed for blending funding into comprehensive partnership approaches in districts.

On a related point, Weiss and Stephen note that federal initiatives have inadvertently signaled a secondary role for partnerships by not explicitly including them in compliance monitoring and evaluation requirements. Including measurement of *effective* partnership efforts as part of school accountability procedures will encourage more comprehensive approaches. These measures should be comprehensive and include attention to the ways schools learn *from* families in developing, implementing, and evaluating partnership initiatives. They should also be *outcome focused*, encouraging schools to move away from narrowly conceived directives to parents on how to help teachers, to a broad set of initiatives that can be shown to positively affect children's academic and social-emotional development.

Finally, I hope that you will support legislation and policies that provide incentives for effective preservice and inservice professional development for educators in how to develop productive relationships with families. With good communication and problem-solving skills, teachers can create productive family-school partnerships. School psychologists and other school-based mental health service

providers have the necessary training and experience to help teachers and principals in their development of these skills. We appreciate your help in creating schools in which all children can learn and thrive.

Thank you for the opportunity to speak with you today.

**Kathleen Minke, PhD, NCSP**, is the President-Elect of NASP. She received her EdS from James Madison University and her PhD from Indiana University. She has worked as a school psychologist in Virginia, Indiana, and Maryland. Since 1991, she has been a Professor in the school psychology program at the University of Delaware and currently serves as Acting Director of the School of Education. Her research interests include family-school collaboration, professional issues in school psychology, and positive behavior supports. She has published more than 20 articles and chapters and has coedited three books targeted toward school psychology practice. She teaches courses in family-school collaboration and solution-oriented, strength-based counseling. For the past six years, she has been a consultant for the state of Delaware's positive behavior support (PBS) initiative. Dr. Minke's work with the project has focused primarily on family-school collaboration, universal screening, and targeted interventions.

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