

# The Family–School Partnership: An Opportunity to Promote the Learning Competence of All Students

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*Abstract.* In this article, family–school partnerships are discussed as a viable and essential way to increase the opportunities and supports for all students to enhance their learning progress and meet the recent demands of schooling inherent in accountability systems and most notably of Title I No Child Left Behind legislation. School psychologists are encouraged to make the family–school partnership a priority by collaborating with school personnel to (a) apply principles from systems-ecological theory to children’s learning; (b) maintain an opportunity-oriented, persistent focus when working with youth and families living in challenging situations; and (c) attend to the process of partnering with families. Example opportunities for school psychologists to make this partnership a priority for children’s academic, social, and emotional learning are delineated.

As I reflect on the past two decades of research and practices with respect to family involvement in education, I am reminded of a Charles Dickens (1859) phrase from *A Tale of Two Cities*, “It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness . . .” (p. 1). The “best of times” is reflected in an increased awareness of the (a) effect of family influences on and contributions by families to children’s educational outcomes; (b) conceptual models for family involvement; (c) importance of establishing shared goals and monitoring child success; (d) characteristics of constructive, collaborative relationships; and (e) variety of home- and school-based activities to engage families in education (Chen, 2001; Christenson & Sheridan, 2001; Comer, Haynes, Joyner, & Ben-Avie, 1996; Epstein, 1995; Henderson & Mapp, 2002; Nord & West, 2001; Sheridan, Kratochwill, & Bergan, 1996; Swap, 1993). It is noteworthy that previous efforts to examine school psychological service delivery at invited

conferences (Brown, Cardon, Coulter, & Meyers, 1982; Ysseldyke & Weinberg, 1981) and publications (Talley, Kubiszyn, Brassard, & Short, 1996) have highlighted the seminal role of parents for students’ school success. At the beginning of the 21st century, our myriad efforts as a discipline—researchers, trainers, and practitioners—have resulted in the family–school partnership being recognized as salient for positive developmental and learning outcomes of children and youth.<sup>1</sup>

The “worst of times” is evident in the disconnect of the two primary socializing agents for educational success. This disconnect is seen daily across our schools in (a) predominant use of the school-to-home transmission model (Swap, 1993); (b) the extreme social and physical distance between some educators and families; (c) diminished resources for implementing family–school programs; (d) challenges reaching all families; (e) challenges related to addressing the needs of non-English speaking families and children identified as

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English Language Learners (ELL); and (f) too little focus on the interaction process that yields a strong relationship as various interventions are implemented (Christenson & Sheridan, 2001; Lontos, 1992). Although shared responsibility across home and school for educational outcomes is the rhetoric, school policies and practices are not always aligned with this notion. I suspect an analysis of current assessment and intervention practices would reveal infrequent use of those that focus on home and school as contexts for children's development and learning.

### **Our Challenge as a Discipline**

Educators often ask: How can schools get families to support their values and practices? Coincidentally, families often ask: How can families get schools to be responsive to their needs and aspirations for their children? Less often educators and families ask: How can we work together to promote the educational experiences and performance of students or this student? A recent challenge for practice is to conceptualize our work with families in a way that focuses on increasing students' opportunities and support for meeting the new demands of schooling inherent in accountability systems.

### **Different Conceptualizations of Family Involvement**

There are different ways to conceptualize family involvement in education. The variations imply the value of parental participation in education, and they underscore the importance of the home as a learning environment. However, only some underscore active, ongoing engagement of parents and educators in ways that connect directly with children's learning. Consider three variations. First, do we view our goal as enhancing parent involvement in education? If so, Grolnick, Benjet, Kurowski, and Apostleris (1997) suggested parent involvement is the dedication of resources by the parent to the child in terms of (a) behavior (activities at home and school); (b) cognitive-intellectual (intellectually stimulating, enriching home environment); and (c)

personal (knowledge of child's progress and learning content). Disseminating information on home support for learning is a practice congruent with this orientation (Walberg, 1984; Ysseldyke & Christenson, 2002). Or, second, do we view our goal as enhancing the interface of home and school to promote students' learning competence? If so, Moles and D'Angelo (1993) professed that "School-family partnerships are the mutual collaboration, support, and participation of parents and school staff at home or at the school site in activities and efforts that directly and positively affect the educational progress of children" (p. 14). Developing family-school interventions to address mutual concerns is a practice congruent with this orientation (Carlson, Hickman, & Horton, 1992; Galloway & Sheridan, 1994). Or, third, do we add the essential nature of the partnership with parents to ensure optimal conditions for students' learning? If so, Christenson and Sheridan (2001) asserted that "families and schools as partners" refers to the following defining features:

- "A *student-focused philosophy* wherein educators and families cooperate, coordinate, and collaborate to enhance learning opportunities, educational progress, and school success for students in four domains: academic, social, emotional, and behavioral.
- A belief in shared responsibility for educating and socializing children—both families and educators are *essential* and provide resources for children's learning and progress in school. There are no prescribed roles or activities for families or educators; rather, options for active, realistic participation are created.
- An emphasis on the quality of the interface and ongoing connection between families and schools. Creating a constructive *relationship* (how families and educators work together in meaningful ways) to execute their respective roles in promoting the academic and social development of children and youth is most important.
- A *preventive, solution-oriented* focus in which families and educators strive to create conditions that facilitate student learning, engagement, and development." (pp. 37–38)

In this orientation, educators are very proactive with parents, actively reaching out to negotiate feasible roles for parental engagement with children's learning across school years, especially for students at risk of educational failure, and doing so with much persistence (Christenson & Carroll, 1999). Parents are essential partners and a philosophy of shared responsibility permeates school policies and practices. Given the changing educational context, families and schools as partners is the focus of this article.

### **Standards and Accountability in the Educational Context**

Partnering with families to enhance learning outcomes is essential to meet the new accountability demands of schooling. According to the Education Commission of the States, educators and parents in at least 20 states are facing the effect of high-stakes assessment on students' grade placement; they find themselves making decisions about grade retention or social promotion, "either-or" decisions that do not guarantee effective instructional programming. In addition, 18 states have high-school exit exams and six others are phasing in exams (not yet withholding diplomas) (<http://www.ecs.org>). As a result of these changes, parents and educators are concerned about increased rates of drop out. Also, as part of the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act, schools are being held accountable by the U.S. Department of Education to demonstrate improvement for all students, including those with disabilities, ELL, and those living in poverty, highly mobile, and homeless (<http://www.nclb.gov>).

NCLB provides an exciting opportunity for school psychology to build on consultation and intervention-oriented practices. It explicitly defines "all." With its focus on learning outcomes, I view NCLB as a golden opportunity for school psychologists to change the way we work. Not only can we broaden the students whom we serve, but we can change our orientation to partnering with families so that the probability of home and school support for students to meet specified educational standards is increased. We can ensure that shared

responsibility for learning outcomes is advocated.

As school psychologists act on this opportunity, two major contributions to the educational programming for students seem likely. First, NCLB emphasizes academic achievement, and yet, we know the power of social and emotional learning for academic skills (e.g., Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning; <http://www.casel.org>). Although school personnel have underscored academic engagement (i.e., time on task, academic learning time), I would suggest that as school psychologists interested in social and emotional learning and high-school completion, we must also consider students' levels of cognitive engagement (i.e., self-regulated learner, student responsibility, using learning strategies to complete a task), behavioral engagement (i.e., participation—classroom and extra curricular, attendance), and psychological engagement (i.e., identification with school, belonging, positive peer relationships)—all of which are positive, significant, low-to-moderate correlates of academic achievement (Christenson & Anderson, 2002). For many of the student subgroups, increases in achievement may be revealed only after the students' connection at school and with learning is improved.

Second, school psychologists must ensure that a shared responsibility orientation is front and center. The goal of family-school connections for children's learning must be to create a culture of success that enhances learning experiences and competencies across home and school and underscores that the partnership means shared goals, contributions, and accountability (Fantuzzo, Tighe, & Childs, 2000). Unfortunately, NCLB seems to deviate from this partnership message as parents have more rights and fewer articulated responsibilities in fostering student engagement at school and with learning.

NCLB identifies schools as needing improvement if their overall performance does not improve from year to year or if subgroups do not make adequate yearly progress (AYP). School districts must report school performance data broken down by school (i.e., a

school report card) and subgroups annually, and suffer sanctions (e.g., pay for supplemental services as requested by parents) for not making AYP. Along with test performance, graduation rate, defined as the percentage of ninth graders receiving a standard diploma in 4 years, is a required indicator in high school AYP calculations. Although the U.S. Department of Education has recognized the importance and value of parent participation in education and is actively promoting roles for parents in NCLB with their written materials on tips for parents (<http://nces.ed.gov>; Partnership for Family Involvement in Education, 2000), my reading of NCLB does not see delineated responsibilities for parents. In contrast, the National Educational Goals 1 (School Readiness) and 8 (Parent Participation) designated roles and responsibilities for educators and families (<http://www.negp.gov>). In this regard, NCLB represents a step backward. Federal policies, like school practices, are not aligned with the notion of shared responsibility for learning outcomes.

Our challenge is to create conditions for a culture of success for all students. Although this is a daunting task, I suggest the probability of educators' success will be heightened only if they make the family-school partnership a priority. School psychologists can provide leadership by applying systems-ecological theory to children's learning, maintaining an opportunity-oriented, persistent focus when working with youth and families living in challenging situations, and attending to the process for partnering with parents—all with an eye toward meeting specified, educational standards for students.

### **Applying Systems-Ecological Theory**

Systems-ecological theory provides a conceptual framework for organizing the reciprocal influences on children's learning and the degree to which the family-school mesosystem emphasizes congruent socialization practices for students as learners (Bronfenbrenner, 1992). The four systems principles of circular causality, nonsummativity, equifinality, and multifinality are relevant for the family-school interface (Christenson &

Sheridan, 2001). Circular causality denotes that change in one individual affects other individuals and the group as a whole. School difficulties affect children's behavior within a family, and conversely family problems influence students' achievement or behavior at school. Nonsummativity refers to the system as a whole being greater than the sum of its parts; the whole adds the property of relationship to the parts. Coordinating effort among home, school, and community resources achieves a synergistic relationship, and the notion of synergism further underscores that school and family together can achieve more than either alone. According to the principle of equifinality, the same outcome may result from different antecedents. For example, families whose interactional styles are diverse may each have children who are experiencing school success. Simply stated, there is more than one path to the same goal; thus, options for family involvement are not only accepted but expected from systems theory. Finally, multifinality means that similar initial conditions may lead to dissimilar end states; thus similar home support for learning strategies may have different effects on children's completion of homework. Therefore, a standard, uniform prescription for parental assistance with homework may achieve the desired goal for some children, but not for others.

School psychology has an opportunity to reframe students' learning progress and needs as a function of contributions from multiple contexts. Our goal is to understand development in context by (a) noting the relevance for child outcomes of "immediate settings" (i.e., microsystems) and the "larger contexts" (i.e., mesosystems, exosystems, macrosystems) in which the immediate settings are embedded; (b) focusing on reciprocal relationships among systems, rather than on the properties or practices characteristic of one system; and (c) attending to the individual's perception and meaning of a given situation to make sense of the variable circumstances in which children live and learn (Bronfenbrenner, 1992). Bronfenbrenner recognized how belief systems influence child outcomes. For example, parental attitudes toward education af-

fect family goals and practices, and ultimately child performance at school. Similarly, Pianta and Walsh (1996) described a necessary belief system for educators, one where educators understand that children develop and learn in the context of the family, and that system (i.e., child/family) must interface in a positive way with the school system and schooling issues for children's educational performance to be optimal. Not all educators recognize the impact of the mesosystem for learning or believe interventions should encompass the family. However, this may be considered the difference between considering families as "essential partners" and considering families as "desirable extras."

### **Underscoring the Family-School Mesosystem for Learning**

The failure to include routine assessment and intervention practices that focus on family and schools as contexts for children's development and learning is an example of not thinking systemically about students' level of educational performance. We seldom ask: What contextual influences enhance learning and development of children and youth? or What conditions help this child make a personal investment in learning? Capturing the degree to which children's family and school contexts are learning environments, and complementary (not symmetrical) roles are created, represents a much needed, new perspective for advancing educational outcomes for students.<sup>2</sup> Fortunately, ecological models of school learning (Carroll, 1963; Pianta & Walsh, 1996) and assessment approaches exist for understanding the effect of the family-school mesosystem on students' learning. For example, Ysseldyke and Christenson (2002) have confirmed conditions (instructional support for learning, home support for learning, and home-school support for learning) that enhance the probability that students will be optimally successful in school or engaged as learners. Furthermore, identifying students' responsiveness to home-school intervention has been highlighted as a role for school psychologists (Pasternack, 2002).

Research in the past two decades has demonstrated the power of the family-school mesosystem on children's school success. The power of out-of-school learning time helps to explain school performance differences (Clark, 1990). Home learning resources and opportunities, especially during summer, are a differentiating factor between low and high achievers (Alexander, Entwisle, & Olson, 2001). Another explanatory factor for low school performance is the discontinuity students experience between their school and home environments in terms of expectations and support for learning (Comer et al., 1996; Phelan, Davidson, & Yu, 1998; Swap, 1993). We know that not all children learn the attitudes, skills, and behaviors that prepare them well for the tasks of school. Consider the finding that 84% of 1,036 high-school students reported that their parents were available to help with schoolwork; however, 87% of students who received grades of A or B reported that their parents were available to help with schoolwork, whereas 24% of students who received grades lower than C reported that their parents were unavailable to help with schoolwork (Binns, Steinberg, & Amorosi, 1997). Finally, what parents do to support learning predicts scholastic ability better than who families are (Clark, 1983; Walberg, 1984).

### **Explanations for Uninvolved Families**

The interface of home and school is strong for some families, weak for others, and nonexistent for others. When students are not meeting the standards in school, and one in three students is behind a year or more in school as reported by the Children's Defense Fund (<http://www.childrensdefense.org>), educators often may say, "I never see the families I want to see." This comment reflects a serious omission, namely no analysis of how school practices influence parent engagement at school and with learning.

Most often parental reasons for lack of engagement at school and with learning are delineated in the literature as barriers. This is an incomplete picture, as barriers exist for educators and the family-school relationship (Liontos, 1992). As categorized in Table 1,

**Table 1**  
**Barriers for Families, Educators, and the Family–School Relationship**

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Relationship Barriers

Families

Structural Barriers

- Lack of role models, information, and knowledge about resources.
- Lack of supportive environment and resources (e.g., poverty, limited access to services).
- Economic, emotional, and time constraints.
- Child care and transportation.

Psychological Barriers

- Feelings of inadequacy; low sense of self-efficacy.
- Adopting a passive role by leaving education to schools.
- Linguistic and cultural differences, resulting in less “how to” knowledge about school policies and practices and the parental role in education.
- Suspicion about treatment from educators.
- Perceived lack of responsiveness to parental needs or desires.

Educators

Structural Barriers

- Lack of funding for family outreach programs.
- Lack of training for educators on how to create and sustain partnerships with families.
- Limited knowledge of data-based approaches.
- Time constraints.

Psychological Barriers

- Ambiguous commitment to working with parents as partners.
  - Use of negative communication about students’ school performance and productivity.
  - Use of stereotypes about families, such as dwelling on family problems as an explanation for students’ performance.
  - Stereotypic views of people, events, conditions, or actions that are not descriptive of behavior, but portray a casual orientation.
  - Doubts about the abilities of families to address schooling concerns.
  - Wary of interacting with families or fear of conflict.
  - Narrow conception of the roles families can play related to socializing learners.
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(Table 1 continues)

(Table 1 continued)

## Family–School Relationship

## Structural Barriers

- Limited time for communication and meaningful dialogue.
- Communication primarily during crises.
- Limited contact for building trust within the family–school relationship.
- Limited skills and knowledge about how to collaborate.
- Lack of a routine communication system.
- Limited understanding of the constraints faced by the other partner.

## Psychological Barriers

- Partial resistance toward increasing home–school cooperation.
- Lack of belief in a partnership orientation to enhance student learning/development.
- A blaming and labeling attitude permeates the home–school atmosphere.
- A win-lose rather than a win-win attitude in the presence of conflict.
- Tendencies to personalize anger-provoking behaviors by the other individual.
- Misunderstanding differences in parent-educator perspectives about children’s performance.
- Psychological and cultural differences that lead to assumptions and “build walls.”
- Limited use of perspective taking or empathizing with the other person.
- Limiting impressions of child to observations in only one environment.
- Assumption that parents and teachers must hold identical values and expectations.
- Failure to view differences as strengths.
- Previous negative interactions and experiences between families and schools.
- Failure to recognize the importance of preserving the family–school relationship across time.

*Note.* It is important to note that these issues, which are drawn from Christenson & Sheridan, (2001), Lontos (1992), Moles (1993), and Weiss & Edwards (1992), are neither an exhaustive list nor is there any implication that they are weighted equally.

barriers for families, educators, and the relationship can be characterized in terms of structural aspects, which tend to dominate school-based discussions, and psychological (i.e., attitudinal) aspects. Both are important; however, the former ensures access between parents and educators, whereas the latter reflects an interpersonal piece. These barriers are dynamic and they must be understood in relation to each

other. Conceptualizing barriers for each socializing system as well as the relationship may serve to promote perspective taking and enhance the understanding of constraints involved for all individuals. Understanding family constraints is seminal to educators’ developing sensitivity and responsiveness to families’ needs and desires for their children’s schooling experiences. Educators must be sen-

sitive to the status-oriented family issues such as socioeconomic status, parental education, and number of adults in the home (Grolnick et al., 1997; Lareau, 1987). However, the psychological aspects, including parents' role conceptions, sense of self-efficacy related to involvement, attitudes toward education, and expectations for their children's performance (Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1997) should be our primary concern. Parents are able to dedicate resources to their children's education provided the demands of their personal lives are reasonable and their sense of self-efficacy is adequate (Grolnick et al., 1997). Unfortunately these circumstances do not always represent the conditions in which some children are learning and developing. Therefore, the support provided by educators is critical for understanding outcomes for specific student subgroups. Based on a review of 66 studies, Henderson and Berla (1994) concluded that the most accurate home predictors of student success in school are the ability of the family, with the help and support of school personnel, to create a positive home learning environment, communicate high and realistic expectations for their children's school performance and future careers, and to become involved in their children's schooling. All emphasize a positive parental attitude about the value of education.

The stimulus for engaging parents in education lies with educators; therefore, addressing barriers for educators is necessary. At the school level, it appears that strong leadership and administrative support are essential to increasing meaningful family involvement. Schools report greater success in engaging parents in a partnership when they are responsive to the needs of parents and are friendly and welcoming to parents (Haynes, Comer, & Hamilton-Lee, 1989). Some school practices "fail" families (Christenson & Sheridan, 2001). For example, responding only in a crisis, defining (and labeling) the family solely by structure (e.g., "single parent"), and viewing the family as deficient are far too common examples of school practices that result in an uncomfortable atmosphere for discussion and interaction between families and school personnel.

Common labels often surround what parents and families are (i.e., uneducated or poor) or what they are failing to do (how they are failing their children) as defined by the school's agenda. Concomitantly, there is a lack of attention to personal characteristics of a parent or family ("who" they are) and what they do to support their children. We fail as educators when we form conclusions based on what we believe families need. This is heightened when we do not consider how families may be supporting their children's education already. In fact, parents who experience diverse ethnic, cultural, socioeconomic, linguistic, and educational backgrounds are involved in the lives of their children, regardless of whether they are formally involved in their school life (Bempechat, 1998; Edwards, Fear, & Gallego, 1995). Furthermore, many families are involved in the education of their children, albeit in ways that school personnel may not consider because they see no concrete product (Wright & Smith, 1998). As a result, there is too little outreach to families and children about whom school personnel are most concerned. If educators portray families as "dysfunctional," then how can a partnership for children's learning occur (Cavell, 2000)?

Parents and educators desire collaborative relationships; however, many barriers are present. In addition to those listed in Table 1, consider how the different perspectives held by parents and educators influence their communication (Chrispeels, 1987). For example, parents are (and should be) concerned with their child's individual progress and needs. Educators are (and should be) focused on the progress and needs of the whole class or group. This difference must be discussed, understood, and valued as assessment-intervention links for children are created; otherwise the probability of communication difficulties, often reflected in blaming and finger pointing, is heightened.

The barriers can be conceptualized as problem-focused ones that seem insurmountable for connecting family and school for the benefit of children's learning. They also can be conceptualized as opportunity-focused ones that provide school psychologists with an expanded role to consult about creating success-

ful learning environments (Ysseldyke & Christenson, 2002). The good news is that barriers, if identified, understood, and thought of as opportunities, can lead to positive service delivery changes, such as school practices for outreach to families or new responsibilities for families.

### **Maintaining an Opportunity-Oriented, Persistent Focus**

As school psychologists and other school personnel know only too well, the variability in children's lives is remarkable. *America's Children: Key National Indicators of Well-Being 2002* (<http://www.childstats.gov>) describes the changing population and diverse family context in which 70.4 million American children are living.<sup>3</sup> For the first time, less than a quarter of American households consist of nuclear families (<http://www.contemporaryfamilies.org>). One significant change is a sharp increase in families headed by unmarried partners. Nationally, the number of unmarried partners grew by 71% in the 1990s. Additionally, 33% of all births in 2000 were to unmarried women.

Understanding the effects of cultural and social capital in relation to the notion of supporting families to be engaged at school and with learning is integral to our success for partnering. Growing numbers of parents have not had the benefit of a positive personal schooling experience or, as new immigrants to the United States, are unfamiliar with school policies and practices or view the purpose of education quite differently (Bempechat, 1998). For example, the foreign-born population of the United States has increased dramatically. In 2001, 19% of children had at least one foreign-born parent. Also, the percentage of children whose parents have less than a high-school diploma is much higher among children with a foreign-born parent, suggesting the vital role information on schooling plays for parents to be engaged with educators. Less cultural capital (Lareau, 1987) makes it difficult for parents to support their children's learning and to navigate the educational system, particularly at the secondary level.

The amount of time available for parents to support their children's learning (espe-

cially if it requires being present at school) and to interact with children about personal matters is shrinking due to increases in single parent and dual income families. Referred to as the erosion of social capital, Coleman (1987) argued that the loss of quality student-adult interaction and time was a primary reason for decline in school performance and for more children being unprepared for school tasks in kindergarten. More than 75% of all poor children live in working families, and supports for these families raising children are less than desirable. For example, availability of affordable child care is a primary issue. In 2001, 61% of children (i.e., 12 million) from birth through age 6 years (not yet in kindergarten) received some form of child care on a regular basis from people other than their parents, and about half of children in kindergarten to Grade 8 received nonparental child care. Three percent of children in kindergarten to Grade 3 and 25% of children in Grades 4 to 8 cared for themselves regularly before or after school (<http://www.factsinaction.org>). Parents want more after school programming, citing the following barriers: not enough programs (51%), programs not affordable (34%), and mediocre quality of existing programs (31%). The number of parents a child lives with is strongly linked to the resources available to children. For example, low-income children (less than \$1500 per month) were half as likely to participate in sports, lessons, or clubs as high-income children (\$4500 or more per month) (<http://www.factsinaction.org>). Also, the decline in affordable housing is a complicating factor (<http://www.contemporaryfamilies.org>). In 1999, 35% of U.S. households (owners and renters) with children had one or more of three housing problems: physically inadequate housing, crowded housing, or housing that costs more than 30% of family income. Some statistics suggest that families need support so that they can assist their children's adaptation to the demands of schooling. For example, 58% of children ages 3 to 5 years were read to daily by a family member in 2001; however, the rates varied as a function of mother's educational level (73% for children whose mother graduated from college; 42% for children whose mother

did not finish high school). Also, in 1999, among children ages 3 to 5 years not yet enrolled in kindergarten, those with multiple risk factors were generally less likely than those without risk factors or with only one to engage in literacy activities frequently with their families. The implications for language development and emergent literacy are glaring. At the other end of the schooling process, the Center on Education Policy reported that 58% to 95% of students passed state highschool exit exams on the first attempt (<http://www.ecs.org>). Asian and Caucasian students perform well; however, the subgroups of students that are well below the rate for the total population include African American and Hispanic students, students on free or reduced lunch, students with disabilities, and ELL, all students who are specifically targeted in NCLB.

Repeatedly, little change in educational performance of student subgroups targeted by NCLB has been reported by the National Center for Education Statistics (U.S. Department of Education, 2003; <http://www.nces.ed.gov>). The failure of some students to perform at normative levels and the variability in children's lives provide school psychology an opportunity to reframe who is at risk for school failure and to support families with respect to their responsibility to foster students' learning progress.

### **Determining Risk for School Failure**

Although many statistics represent status variables (i.e., demographics) over which educators have little or no control, they allow us to identify individual or groups of students for whom additional supports are warranted to meet the standards set by teachers and parents, and more recently NCLB—populations with whom the discipline of school psychology should take special note. To ignore the apparent gaps in educational outcomes for students reported annually by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) is to “admire the problem.” In contrast to focusing exclusively on reported statistics, Pianta and Walsh (1996) have redefined risk for school failure by extending the discussion beyond status variables to include the effect of the quality of the fam-

ily-school relationship as a primary contributing factor to level of child risk. They argued that statistics describe what is, given existing circumstances, but say little about what can be, given different circumstances. They theorized that children are educated in low-risk circumstances if the child/family and schooling systems are functional; home and school communicate, providing children with congruent messages about their learning. High-risk circumstances occurred when children derived meanings from home or school that resulted in conflicting emotions, motivations, or goals for students.

Students' adaptation to schooling depends in part on the degree of support, opportunity to learn, and resources available to the child across settings and school years (Pianta & Walsh, 1996). We know the benefits of family-school collaboration. Extending far beyond the notion of involving parents in activities, they include (a) sharing in educational goals for countering information from competing sources such as media and peers; (b) maximizing opportunities for students to learn at school and at home; (c) building social capital for students through mutual support efforts by families and educators; (d) circumventing blame when children exhibit learning and behavior difficulties in school; (e) enhancing communication and coordination among family members and school personnel; (f) maintaining home-school continuity in approaches across school years; (g) sharing ownership and commitment to educational goals; (h) increasing understanding of the complexities of a child and his or her situation; and (i) pooling of resources across home and school, which increases the range and quality of solutions, diversity in expertise, and integrity of educational programs (Christenson & Sheridan, 2001).

To ensure better outcomes for students, the discipline of school psychology can provide leadership by identifying groups of students for systematic intervention (e.g., as determined by district data on mandated tests or NCES data), designing mesosystemic intervention programs, and evaluating the effectiveness of these programs; thereby adding to our knowledge base of evidence-based interventions (Gutkin, 2002). This, of course, means

we have myriad opportunities to partner with diverse families.

### **Opportunities to Partner with Diverse Families**

Educational statistics collected annually by the NCES have identified repeatedly the same subgroups of students for whom school performance is poor. Rather than the statistics suggesting a hopeless situation (e.g., poverty rates, ELL services) or an attribution for poor school performance, they represent an opportunity for school psychologists, in collaboration with others, to embrace cultural and ethnic diversity to learn of new ways to educate students and support students and their families.

It is critical to differentiate home support for learning and supporting families (Christenson & Sheridan, 2001). Equally important to sharing effective home support for learning strategies is supporting families to sustain their engagement with their children's learning. Families do not need to be fixed but they need to be supported in their efforts to educate their children in ways they see fit. We support families when we deliver a clear, unambiguous message about the benefits of the partnership and the essential nature of the parental role for children's learning. Many parents need an explicit invitation to partner. Using the established empirical base, we can explain that children perform most optimally in school when instructional, home, and home-school support for learning exists (Ysseldyke & Christenson, 2001). Should parents choose not to participate, school personnel can explain they will do their part at school; however, they can also make it clear that they believe this is only part of the equation for school success (Christenson, 2000; Christenson & Buerkle, 1999). Repeating this message and providing opportunities to parents is critical for some parents to become engaged.

We support families when we meet families where they are and when we strive to understand their perspectives, desires, and needs. Bempechat (1998) articulated a series of provocative questions related to variation in children's home socialization practices, such as: How hard does the child have to try to do

well in school? How have the parents prepared the child for the tasks in school? What is the parental understanding of the schooling process? What is the parental understanding of their roles and responsibilities? How do the parents encourage their child's success in school? How have negative attitudes about learning developed? Reaching out to parents and finding out what they desire to be actively engaged in their children's learning and to meet the standards (e.g., What do you desire from the school so you can assist your child's learning?) is critical. We want to set the expectation for parental engagement, but we should be wary of dictating how parents might best participate. Consider how a belief in shared responsibility for educational outcomes might be advanced if educators routinely invited parents to partner to promote learning competencies (even when the child is having learning difficulties), expected parents to be engaged, and were willing to negotiate how parents participate.

We support families when we individualize information on successful home and classroom learning environments (Ysseldyke & Christenson, 2002). A key is to find what works for a particular child and his or her family. The intensity and frequency with which the home environment is a learning environment must be considered. For example, if parents cannot help due to specific circumstances (e.g., working two jobs), a supportive strategy is to identify with the parents an individual who serves as a contact with the school and supports the student's learning after school hours. Finally, engaging parents in ways that children perceive as helpful is important, as too much involvement may be interpreted by youth as parents trying to be controlling and intrusive.

There is no question that education must be made a salient focus in many homes. For some families, education and schoolwork get lost, whether to excessive family and work demands, previous negative interactions with school personnel, or negative personal school experience. We support families to enhance learning at home when we find a way to affirm all parents' participation. We can ask parents: How do you want to be involved? Af-

firming parents' roles and giving them options helps educators to be responsive to specific situational demands. The classification of parental roles by Scott-Jones (1995) is very helpful. She has suggested that parents can enhance learning at home and performance in school by valuing, mentoring, helping, and doing; note that doing is not necessarily linked to child learning. Similarly, the distinction between academic and motivational home support for learning is highly relevant (Bempechat, 1998). We would be wise to rethink the traditional role for parents of assisting with and reinforcing academic work (i.e., academic support), and to consider also how parents help by developing habits of learning (i.e., motivational support). Bempechat (1998) has called cogently for parents and teachers to make education and learning a priority, arguing that motivational support for learning (i.e., encouraging student effort, reinforcing the value of learning, persisting in the face of challenge, structuring time for studying) is critical to socialize students as learners. Supporting families to enhance learning at home requires none less than attending to the process for creating productive relationships.

### **Attend to the Process for Partnering**

To move from a cycle of failure for some students to a culture of success for all students, we must direct our efforts toward a process for partnering with families.<sup>4</sup> We know that behavioral and academic difficulties for students do not disappear with one problem-solving session or intervention. Sometimes home and school will work together within and across school years to continue to address mutual concerns and provide mutual support for enhancing the learning progress of youth. A reasonable question is: Have we focused our efforts more on solving the referred child behavior and less on restructuring the family-school relationship to create mutual support for addressing child-related concerns, which may be ongoing? The family-school partnership is a 13-year contract (Epstein, 1995). Educators working as partners with parents in one year strengthen the partnership for subsequent years.

Focusing on process requires reframing our actions from those aimed at a quick solu-

tion for a referral concern to those that reinforce shared responsibility for educational outcomes. Forming connections means developing an intentional and ongoing relationship between school and family designed to directly or indirectly enhance children's learning and development, and to address the obstacles that impede it (Merseth, Schorr, & Elmore, 1999). A shared responsibility orientation operates on a different model of schooling, one in which parents are viewed as essential. A primary focus is placed on the rights, roles, and responsibilities of parents, educators, and students related to children's learning outcomes, not simply on delegation of services to parents (Seeley, 1985). Typical school-based practices have focused on the implementation of activities, driven by the question: How can we involve families? Offering parent involvement activities devoid of a healthy family-school relationship have yielded less than desired levels of active parental engagement and personal investment in children's learning success, particularly for some families. Rather than educators asking how to involve uninvolved families, we should be asking how to enhance learning competencies and educational outcomes for students. Partnering with parents is a viable and necessary avenue.

As described elsewhere (Christenson & Sheridan, 2001), four A's—Approach, Attitudes, Atmosphere, and Actions—represent a process for constructing quality family-school connections for children's learning. The process involves prerequisite conditions that set a tone for partnership, namely (a) the approach adopted toward the role of families; (b) the degree to which constructive attitudes between families and educators exist; and (c) the atmosphere present for interaction between families and educators in their particular school context. They must be addressed for actions to be implemented effectively. Opportunities for school psychologists relative to this process are listed in the Appendix.

### **Approach: The Framework for Interaction with Families**

The framework approach for interaction with families that is supported by several theories and research findings views parents as es-

essential, not merely desirable, for children's optimal performance in school. The view that parents are essential for children's learning is too often an implicit assumption in schools. The missing piece is the explicit acknowledgment, particularly in school attitudes and actions, that parents are essential partners. Adopting an approach that recognizes the significance of families and the contributions of schools for children's engagement at school and with learning provides a necessary framework for family-school connections aimed at promoting students' learning outcomes. This approach focuses on systems perspectives. Children's level of academic, social, and behavioral competence cannot be understood or fostered by locating problems in child, family, or school in the absence of a focus on the dynamic influence of relationships among the systems. The access, voice, and ownership of parents and educators are essential for promoting success of students with and without disabilities. For example, consider the potential impact of parents' and educators' access (i.e., rights to inclusion in decision making processes); voice (i.e., feeling that they were heard and listened to at all points in the process); and ownership (i.e., satisfaction with and contribution to any action plan affecting them) during family-school meetings about students' instructional programming or behavior. School psychologists are poised to ask a question that will advance our knowledge of student outcomes: How are resources of the child and the learning context organized to respond to problems or help the child meet developmental demands or demands of assigned tasks in school over time? The centrality of the role played by students is not lost or minimized as students, in transaction with others, are active participants in their learning. As noted by David Seeley (1985) in his book, *Education Through Partnership*, "The product of education (learning) is not produced by schools, but by students with the help and support of schools, parents, peers, and other community resources" (p. 65).

### **Attitudes: The Values and Perceptions Held about Family-School Relationships**

Partnering with parents is an attitude and is not only an activity to be implemented. And

yet, schools tend to be activity driven, despite the fact that gaining the cooperation of and collaboration with parents is not primarily a function of the activities provided. Rather, "families and schools as partners" is a way of thinking about forming connections, not about how educators can "fix the family." Constructive attitudes, which adopt a collaborative stance and make the relationship a priority, allow school personnel and parents to ask the question, even when differing perspectives are apparent: How can we work together to address a concern, shared goal, or promote the learning competence of a student? The development of constructive attitudes between parents and educators is the responsibility of both educators and parents. Collaboration involves both equality (i.e., the willingness to listen to, respect, and learn from one another) and parity (i.e., the blending of knowledge, skills, and ideas to enhance the relationship, and outcomes for children) (Christenson & Sheridan, 2001). In practice, constructive attitudes are demonstrated and modeled by parents and educators when they (a) listen to one another's perspective; (b) view differences as strengths; (c) focus on mutual interests; (d) share information to co-construct understandings and interventions; (e) respect the skills and knowledge of each other by asking for ideas and opinions; (f) plan together and make decisions that address parents', teachers', and students' needs; (g) share in decision making about a child's educational program; (h) share resources to work toward goal attainment; (i) provide a common message about schoolwork and behavior; (j) demonstrate a willingness to address conflict; (k) refrain from finding fault; and (l) commit to sharing successes.

### **Atmosphere: The Climate in Schools for Families and Educators**

An atmosphere that facilitates collaborative family-school partnerships is one that is characterized by trust, effective communication, and a mutual problem-solving orientation. Of particular importance is the degree to which educators have examined the school climate to ensure that it is welcoming and inclusive for all families. In a recent study, ethni-

cally diverse parents overwhelmingly identified relationship variables as the most significant determinants of welcoming school environments (Windram, Godber, Hurley, Marquez, & Christenson, 2002). Parental perspectives did not vary as a function of ethnicity (Caucasian vs. non-Caucasian) or educational service delivery (regular vs. special education); however, there were significant differences as a function of school level (elementary vs. secondary). Elementary schools were viewed as more welcoming on several dimensions.

Explicit opportunities for parents and educators to discuss the culture of the school and of the family (i.e., norms, values, beliefs, expectations, actions) are integral to the development of trusting relationships (Phelan et al., 1998). We need to ask: Is it possible to respect each other, make joint decisions, and engage in honest, two-way communication, all defining features of collaboration, without trust? Trust is an intangible characteristic that develops over time with repeated contact and exposure. Some families may be willing to trust school personnel more readily than others, particularly if they are accustomed to the traditional practices and norms established in schools. One-time events or interactions with family members do not allow educators to learn about family beliefs, practices, values, or preferences. They do not allow families to explore their feelings about the school, or their comfort level with adults in that environment who may be different from them on a number of important dimensions. And, they do not provide ongoing opportunities to allow parents and educators to learn from and about each other and increase acceptance of each other. Trust building between home and school often runs counter to practices in schools where quick and efficient solutions are sought. In many circumstances, efficiency is valued over the interaction process that requires time to build trusting relationships and get to know one other. Too often parental participation is initiated in the midst of a crisis situation, such as when a child's behavior at school becomes uncontrollable. In such situations, trust between parents and teachers is vital to yield a positive outcome for the student (e.g., the development and

implementation of an intervention plan to address the behavioral concerns).

Effective communication sets the tone for a positive atmosphere or "climate building" between family and schools (Weiss & Edwards, 1992). Communication must inform parents about the policies and practices of schools, ways to enhance students' learning and development, and monitoring students' progress. In a study sponsored by the National Association of School Psychologists, parents (regardless of income level, ethnicity, or their child's academic and behavioral performance) overwhelmingly indicated they would use information on how schools function (e.g., how grades are earned, scheduling, transitions, homework) to assist their children's school performance (Christenson, Hurley, Sheridan, & Fenstermacher, 1997). In fact, the top 11 of 33 preferred parent involvement activities were oriented toward informing parents about school and student learning and behavior. School personnel want parents to be involved, but parental engagement depends on parents being informed, invited, and feeling included, not controlled. Unfortunately, not all school practices (a) inform parents frequently and systematically about their child's progress toward learning goals and/or how to assist children's learning (i.e., specific process involved in learning to read); (b) invite parents to share information and resources relevant to the child's learning; and (c) include parents, by setting mutually determined goals and shaping intervention plans to be feasible for implementation by parents and teachers. Finally, we must be concerned about disconnects between home and school perspectives and practices. For example, a recent national study (Chen, 2001) revealed discrepancies between educators' and parents' reports on school practices, particularly related to conveying information and including parents in decision making. For each school practice, public kindergarten to Grade 8 school personnel were more likely than parents to indicate that schools used the practice. Our concern must be focused on why educators' practices are not informing parents as intended.

Adopting a mutual problem-solving orientation is yet another opportunity to commu-

nicate effectively with families, particularly in terms of providing realistic, yet optimistic messages about students' learning competence. Problem-solving structures provide an opportunity for bidirectional communication, view parents and school personnel as resources for addressing educational concerns, and help to foster optimism about what the partners can accomplish by working together (Carlson et al., 1992; Sheridan et al., 1996).

### **Actions: Strategies for Building Shared Responsibility**

Christenson and Sheridan (2001) have described in detail seven broad actions to enhance family-school connections for children's learning: (a) garnering administrative support, (b) acting as a systems advocate, (c) implementing family-school teams, (d) increasing problem solving across home and school, (e) identifying and managing conflict, (f) supporting families, and (g) helping teachers improve communication and relationships with families. Recognizing that families belong to no one discipline, I suggest that an eighth action for school psychologists is to collaborate with others in the development of cohesive, coordinated family-school-community interventions (Adelman & Taylor, 1999). Actions, which are oriented toward building shared responsibility for educational outcomes, are purposefully distinguished from activities (see Appendix). Actions focus on the connection between family and school for children's learning, whereas activities represent a narrow focus on how to involve families in education.

With respect to building shared responsibility for educational outcomes, school psychology can be a stimulus for thinking of how common points of parent-educator contact (e.g., orientation/back to school night, workshops, monitoring students' performance, conferencing) can be altered to invite parent participation, increase parental responsibility for learning, and to focus all actions on shared responsibility for improved learning outcomes (Christenson & Sheridan, 2001). Also, we can ensure that the balance of power between parents and professionals is altered to enfranchise parents as equal partners (i.e., using commu-

nication structures to enhance dialogue and mutual understanding of child needs). Harry's (1993) examples of parental assessment roles: parents as assessors, presenters of reports, policy makers, and advocates and peer supports can be embellished to include parental intervention roles.

### **Roles for School Psychology**

School psychologists can have a truly significant impact on student engagement with learning, learning experiences, and educational outcomes for all students. We can focus our efforts on the "affordance value" of students' total learning environment, or how the family-school context facilitates or impedes students' adaptation to challenges and demands of schooling. We must attend to critical macrosystemic influences, such as the effect of NCLB and high-school exit exams, on the learning status of individuals and groups of students as well as the national focus on teaching students to read, which includes working with parents. We must understand the belief systems of all families, and be sensitive to the kinds of information and supports they desire as well as the resources they bring to assist their children in meeting educational standards. We can support school personnel to implement practices based on shared responsibility for educational outcomes.

This is the "best of times" for the discipline of school psychology to embrace exciting opportunities to expand our roles by (a) espousing the value of family and school contexts for optimal learning; (b) working to close gaps in educational outcomes for student subgroups; and (c) providing leadership in working with diverse families. Diversity is broad and varied, including characteristics related to ethnicity, socioeconomic status, language, culture, and sexual orientation. I hope the discipline of school psychology will embrace the concept of diversity and strive to build capacity for families and school personnel to partner in enhancing learning outcomes for students. A comprehensive resource delineating not only evidence for the impact of family, school, and community connections on student achievement but also annotated bibliographies

of evidence-based programs has been written by Henderson and Mapp (2002) and is available from the Southwest Educational Development Laboratory (<http://www.sedl.org/connections/>). If school psychology chooses “the age of wisdom,” we will recognize the centrality of collaborating with school personnel to think systematically about students’ learning, maintain an opportunity-oriented, persistent focus when working with youth and families living in challenging situations, and attend to the process for partnering with all families. We will do this for the express purpose of developing and evaluating targeted family–school interventions toward learning goals and for meeting educational standards specified by NCLB.

Also, if school psychology is serious about improving the impact of American education and closing the achievement gap for student subgroups, we will work with others to make family–school partnerships a priority in our schools. I speculate that our contribution would be monumental if, by placing the partnership front and center for child outcomes, we addressed two barriers. First, school personnel (ourselves included) need to be educated in how to partner with parents to promote student competence. Second, school personnel must impact parental and societal attitudes toward education. Regardless of ethnic, economic, or educational background, parents have the capability (and responsibility) to support their children’s learning and to make education a priority. These two broad areas offer promise to move toward the notion of shared responsibility for educational outcomes. It is our job to connect with parents around learning by developing the relationship and addressing barriers for their engagement.

To improve educational outcomes for all students, the philosophy that must permeate all family and school practices is that parents and teachers, families, and schools are essential. Dialogue about the rights, roles and responsibilities, and resources of educators, parents, and students should be routine when planning educational programs. We must be willing to serve as systems consultants and to alter our assessment and intervention practices. We might begin our efforts by:

- Infiltrating all practices in schools with a family–school focus, beginning with existing structures (e.g., pre-referral assistance teams, assessment procedures, instructional and behavioral interventions, parent–teacher conferences).
- Explaining school, home, and partnership conditions that foster students’ learning competence. We partner because we want improved learning outcomes and school experiences for students.
- Actively pursuing and reaching out to parents where they are, whether at home, at work, or in the community. We cannot be setting bound, waiting to interact with parents only when their children do not perform or behave as expected at school.
- Actively pursuing parents early, even at the hospital. Given the powerful data from Hart and Risley (1995) about the impact of early language acquisition on reading achievement and the cultural priorities that parents transmitted through talking as a function of socioeconomic differences, the potential impact of developing mechanisms to converse about and support parents in language development and school readiness seem astounding.
- Individualizing actions adopted in the partnership. For example, some parents may only need information about the essential nature of their role and home support for learning strategies. Other families may need information and attention to a specific constraint, such as the need for reading resources in the home. And other families may also need ongoing support to maintain a connection with educators for their children’s learning.
- Determining under what circumstances a family–school connection may not be beneficial or worth the time expended. (Rutter & Maughan, 2002)

There is no question that extra time is required to collaborate with parents. Educators find time to handle a crisis or conflict between families and schools, perhaps in some cases at the expense of not having time for dialogue and building a relationship. Admittedly, we need to identify time efficient methods. For

example, educators could streamline methods for communicating with families; some methods will reach 80% of the parents (e.g., newsletters), leaving 20% of parents for more unique and undoubtedly more time-consuming methods (e.g., home visiting). Not every strategy must be applied to every parent. Also, school psychologists might consider beginning with a small caseload of targeted students for whom mesosystemic interventions are implemented, and adding students and families across school years. Finally, it is critical to understand that what is being advocated is the development of family-school partnerships, not parent-teacher partnerships or parent-psychologist partnerships. Therefore, if job roles and functions for school personnel are broadened, more families might be reached.

### Closing Comments: The Future

It is time to raise the bar for all children's performance in school; creating family-school partnerships is a viable and essential way to enhance academic, social, and emotional learning of youth. It is my hope that school psychologists will take the initiative to raise the bar for students' performance in school by heeding John Fantuzzo's (1999) advice to make "partner" a verb with all families, including those whose children may be doing less well than desired or who feel disengaged from the schooling process. If we are serious about achieving higher standards and outcomes for students, school psychology must be serious about ensuring that family-school connections for children's learning are routine practice. To alter the culture of failure for many students, which is represented by students viewing school (and learning) as an "interruption in their day," an emphasis must be placed on reciprocal influences where both the family and school must support learners and they must deliver a congruent message about the value of learning. Fifteen years ago, Dorothy Rich (personal communication, 1987) of the Home and School Institute in Washington, D.C. opined, "Families and teachers might wish that the school could do the job alone. But today's school needs families and today's families need the school. In many ways, this mutual need may be the greatest hope for

change." Her statement is highly relevant in 2003. I encourage school psychology to consider partnering with parents to be an exciting opportunity for our discipline to enhance learner outcomes and to provide supports to all students to meet established standards.

### Footnotes

<sup>1</sup>As a speaker at the 2002 *Invitational Conference: The Future of School Psychology*, I was asked to (a) outline critical issues that families face, or will face, in the 21st century relative to schools and children; and (b) propose roles for school psychology, within constraints of the shortage, to address these issues. The issues were to include the important role of parents in education. With respect to these goals, I negotiated with the conference planners to add the centrality of a quality family-school relationship to enhance the academic, social, behavioral, and emotional learning of children and adolescents.

<sup>2</sup>Complementary roles refer to roles, albeit different, for teachers (i.e., formal instruction) and parents (i.e., fostering learning at home, valuing education) directed toward a shared goal, whereas symmetrical roles suggest parents and teachers must engage in a similar task with the child.

<sup>3</sup>Unless otherwise indicated, the statistics for this paper have been drawn from <http://www.childstats.gov>. To avoid any misrepresentation, I have reported them in almost all cases word for word as indicated from the specific source.

<sup>4</sup>The terms parent and family have been used interchangeably in this article. Also, the author recognizes that many students live with guardians and extended family, such as grandparents. All terms should be thought of as potential individuals with whom educators build a relationship to enhance children's learning.

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## APPENDIX

### Example Opportunities for School Psychology to Enhance the Family–School Connection<sup>1</sup>

#### Approach: The Framework for Interaction with Families

- Opportunity to provide consistent messages to families that the school will partner to promote the educational success of students.
- Opportunity to communicate how parents are integral to attaining optimal educational goals for students.
- Opportunity to disseminate a system-wide “essential message”—research has shown that students perform the best in school when parents (out-of-school time) and teachers (in-school time) provide shared standards and expectations, consistent structure, cross-setting opportunity to learn, mutual support, positive, trusting relationships, and modeling (Ysseldyke & Christenson, 2002).
- Opportunity to ensure that the philosophy of the school (i.e., mission statement) explicitly articulates that the family–school relationship (e.g., bi-directional communication) impacts students’ academic, social, behavioral, and emotional learning.
- Opportunity to modify assessment practices to ensure that the effect of mutual influences (no pure school time or home time) on student performance in school are accounted for or that adequate information about the child’s academic and social behavior across settings to “co-construct” the bigger picture is discussed.
- Opportunity to conceptualize children’s level of school performance as a function of the supports for learning present before, during, and after the school day.
- Opportunity to include parents as assessors and presenters of reports during the assessment process (Harry, 1993).
- Opportunity to include parents as policymakers with respect to home–school practices and policies (Comer et al., 1996; Harry, 1993).
- Opportunity to communicate in varied forms (print and non-print) that positive habits of learning are maximized when there is congruence across home and school about the value of edu-

cation, expectations for performance, and support for educational programming.

- Opportunity to model the relevance of a quality family–school partnership by fostering bidirectional communication, enhancing problem solving across home and school, encouraging shared decision making, and reinforcing congruent home–school support for students’ learning.

#### Attitudes: The Values and Perceptions Held about Family–School Relationships

- Opportunity to model an attitude that embraces collaboration as a central mode of operating, and reinforces:
  - (a) problem solving and no-fault interactions;
  - (b) the value of suspending judgment and jumping to conclusions;
  - (c) a positive and strength-based orientation where parents and teachers are doing the best they can; and
  - (d) parents and educators as co-teachers and co-learners about the child’s school performance.
- Opportunity to encourage families and school personnel to engage in perspective taking across home and school, modeling there are no problematic individuals (parents, teachers or students), only a problematic situation that requires the attention of the student, home, and school, all for the benefit of the student’s learning.
- Opportunity to maintain the focus of the family–school connection and communication on student progress and success.
- Opportunity to encourage active parental engagement in decision making; educators inform, invite, and include parents to help address concerns for students’ learning.
- Opportunity to emphasize a win-win attitude in the presence of conflict; the needs of parents, teachers, and students must be considered in educational programming.

### **Atmosphere: The Climate in Schools for Families and Educators**

- Opportunity to ensure that ample trust-building events between parents and schools (e.g., multicultural potlucks/student celebrations, principal's hour, family fun nights, committees designed to address home-school issues, workshops where parents and school personnel learn together) occur before serious decisions are made with respect to educational programming (e.g., special education placement, grade placement).
- Opportunity to analyze home-school communication and develop a plan that includes streamlined system-wide strategies (e.g., regular progress reports, contact time and person) as well as teacher specific or individual strategies (for unique situations).
- Opportunity to ensure that all families, even those with limited contact with schools or negative personal experience with schools, understand the language of schooling (i.e., how schools function).
- Opportunity to work with diverse families to ensure they, and their children, feel connected at school and with learning. We have much to learn from families. For example, what does the purpose of education mean to families from varied cultural backgrounds? How do families see their roles regarding their children's schooling? How can we truly embrace (and help others to) cultural differences and address the needs of non-English-speaking families or parents of students identified as ELLs?
- Opportunity to enhance problem solving with parents as a means for arriving at a plan of action that is based on consensus.

### **Actions: Strategies for Building Shared Responsibility**

- Acting as a systems advocate.
- Opportunity to underscore the salience of the family-school mesosystem in assessment-intervention practices.
- Opportunity to ensure that goals and understanding of child behavior are mutually determined.
- Opportunity to keep and sustain a focus on the salience of education by negotiating a consistent, feasible way for families to support students' reading and learning.
- Opportunity to consult about family-school models and to evaluate school efforts for partnering with families.
- Implementing family-school teams.
- Opportunity to underscore all communication with shared responsibility between families and schools (e.g., discussing co-roles, partnership agreements).
- Opportunity to use bidirectional communication strategies that stress working as partners to improve educational outcomes for students.
- Increasing problem solving across home and school.
- Opportunity to implement solution-oriented approaches for educational planning.
- Opportunity to foster shared responsibility for educational outcomes by inviting parental assistance to resolve school-based concerns, helping parents foster personal goals for children and youth, and finding out what parents desire to fulfill their commitment to their children's educational success.
- Opportunity to actively include and maximize the power of the target student's use of in-school and out-of-school time with mesosystemic interventions (e.g., Galloway & Sheridan, 1994).
- Opportunity to learn from and be responsive to the needs of parents whose children are not being successful in school or parents of groups of children who represent "gaps" in educational outcomes at a national level.
- Identifying and managing conflict.
- Opportunity to facilitate shared decision-making structures stressing that parents' and educators' access, voice, and ownership are heard and understood.

- Opportunity to design, implement, and evaluate problem-solving structures that include perspective taking, learning from each other, and sharing constraints of each system.
- Supporting families.
- Opportunity to reach out to parents who are identified as “hard to reach” for the purpose of learning what would help them foster their children’s learning competence.
- Opportunity to help parents understand policies and practices, be a resource for their questions, provide regular information on their child’s progress and resources to address the gaps in learning, and foster a positive learning environment at home.
- Opportunity to remove obstacles for families that inadvertently discourage active participation (limited personal or material resources to assist student learning).
- Opportunity to describe service delivery to parents in a non-pejorative way (i.e., one that focuses on the kinds of supports parents would find helpful to assist their child’s learning). Parental needs vary; perhaps there are parents who need information (i.e., information only), need attention to unique situational demands/circumstances in the family context (i.e., information and attention), and need support on an ongoing basis (i.e., information and attention and support).
- Helping teachers improve communication and relationships with families.
- Opportunity to communicate the desire to develop a working partnership with families, the crucial nature of family input for children’s educational progress, importance of working together to identify a mutually advantageous solution in light of concerns, and clarity about conditions that foster students’ academic, social, behavioral, and emotional learning (Weiss & Edwards, 1992).
- Opportunity to ensure that parents have needed information to support children’s progress.

<sup>1</sup>These example opportunities were extracted and adapted from concepts presented in Christenson & Sheridan (2001).