

Families as Partners: Making the Connection

School social workers can help overcome barriers to parent-school communication and collaboration.

By Rochelle Leiber-Miller

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Created in collaboration with the National Association of School Psychologists (NASP) to facilitate partnerships between principals and school psychologists and to remove barriers to learning. Additional resources are available at www.nasponline.org/resources/principals.

Jason's story is a familiar one. He is 12 years old, has a learning disability, and is in a transition class in the middle school where he receives three periods of special education services each day. It is the fall of seventh grade for Jason, and the sweet and earnest boy his teachers have known for the past year is being eclipsed by a cloud of poor decisions. The changes are distressing. His behavior has been attention seeking and unpredictable, his attitude about school has become apathetic, and he's now doing minimal class work and refusing to do any homework at all.

When you look closer, Jason's family background is equally troubling. His mother died when he was a toddler, and he is being raised by his father and uncle. Already embarrassed by their home life and reluctant to seek help, they nevertheless made themselves vulnerable and reached out when Jason was in elementary school. At the time, his school had no support personnel on staff at his school, and their requests for support were met with silence, so they retreated into silence themselves. The unwelcome repercussions of this failed interaction are many, and Jason's teachers are concerned and have reported his behavior to the school social worker. They are reaching out to his father, but he has not responded to calls or correspondence and has not yet visited the school.

It is obvious that a family-school connection is imperative to Jason's success, but how to bridge the gap that has formed and establish a trusting relationship with this family is less so. For a school social worker, it begins with an understanding of his family's fear and ends with an intervention and a safe partnership founded on a belief in Jason and a recognition that he will be on a frightening trajectory into high school without such a partnership.

The Development of Social Identity

Adolescence is the most tumultuous time in the development of children. As teens begin to question who they are and where they belong, peer approval becomes paramount to their mental health and social and academic success. Research has shown again and again that the mental health of students is the gateway to their academic success. (Charvat, 2008).

The development of an adolescent's mental health and social identity typically happens in school, where the majority of the day is spent and where they can begin to understand themselves in relation to their age-group peers. For parents, this can be a very difficult time in the process of raising children, a time when they feel they are forfeiting control over their children's development and health. Their participation in the educational process is imperative to the well-being of their children, yet many parents have never stepped into the secondary schools their children attend.

Studies have shown that lack of parental involvement is the biggest problem facing public schools. (Michigan Department of Education, 2002). Naturally, outreach to parents is not an easy process. Schools need an established goal of parental inclusion

and a friendly, safe, and communicative environment. Unless a school has an established outreach program for all parents, the school will continue to struggle with students' emotional and academic problems.

Engaging Diverse Families

An understanding of the different cultures in a school is essential to the success of its students. Communities across the country are changing rapidly. According to Gándara (2011),

The United States is home to the largest number of immigrants of any nation (United Nations, 2006). In 2005, 38.5 million residents of the U.S. were foreign born. As a result more than one of every five children in the public school is either an immigrant or the child of immigrants. (p. 117)

What does this mean to staff members in public schools? First, they must recognize the cultural differences that exist and often hinder communication on many levels in a school: among the students, between themselves and students, and between themselves and students' families. In preparing to engage families, staff members must understand the cultural norms and behaviors of families as well as the language differences that exist between and even within cultures. Hiring bilingual staff members is important for involving parents for whom the language barrier is a significant hindrance. Bilingual teachers are more likely to reach out to immigrant parents than are monolingual teachers because they believe that this is an important part of their role (Hopkins, 2011). In addition, immigrant families

are more comfortable with someone who speaks their language. The support staff in schools can help educate teachers about cultural sensitivity.

Many low-income families, parents, and guardians have not completed their own formal education and are therefore intimidated by the school environment or feel that it is not their role to be involved in the educational process. Many members of those families also work multiple jobs or work nontraditional hours and do not have transportation to come to the schools. Staff members must think outside the box when trying to form relationships with family members, offering accommodations in their availability for meetings, transportation vouchers, translators, and even in-school childcare to visiting parents. When staff members go out of their way to be inclusive and accommodating, parents see the value of their own involvement and participation in their children's education.

Research shows us that economic stress can often lead to disruptive parenting (Taylor, 2004). This, in turn, affects children's ability to feel safe in their environment. When those children come to school, they suffer academically and emotionally and are often viewed as having "behavior problems." Personal contact is the best way to engage parents who have lost their jobs or are experiencing violence in the home. Persistence is the key to identifying the resources available to help those students and families. Offering confidential financial help with school trips, class photographs, and school supplies shows families that schools want to help them.

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school social workers buy and wrap gifts that the social workers personally deliver. On many occasions, I have sat in the living room of a family that has never entered the school, had a cup of tea, and made a sustained connection with the family.

Cohesive Partnerships

School social workers are trained to work with families by contacting parents, visiting homes, making phone calls, and conveying that the school environment is a friendly and safe place. They can set up cluster meetings with the teachers, wherein the parents can meet the teachers and learn about the education their children are receiving and the part they can play in supporting their children's academic development.

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Family Engagement

The ultimate goal of a family-school partnership is to support the emotional and academic well-being of adolescents, so what specific assistance can a school offer parents once the relationship has been built? Communication is essential. Parents need school information, guidelines, and resources to help their children with their homework and academic development. An effective strategy is to establish a family resource center, which would offer parents access to the library, computers, and either informal or group meetings. Ideally, this

resource center would have flexible daytime and evening hours to accommodate working parents' schedules.

For many parents, daytime or nighttime workshops can be set up. Some topics can include:

- Parenting an adolescent: raising your expectations for your children
- How to help your child with homework: creating a structured learning environment in the home
- Establishing your social identity: helping your child make good choices with friends
- Drugs and alcohol: signs to look for.

Next Steps

When considering how to move forward, school leaders should ask themselves the following questions:

- How can administrators strengthen school-family partnerships?
- What must staff members do to engage families?
- Does the district have a plan for family engagement?
- What resources do I have in my school? Are there school social workers who can make connections with families?
- Can we coordinate with community groups to engage families?

Conclusion

Many schools face challenges when reaching out to families and working to create a culture of parental involvement. Parents also face obstacles when becoming involved in their children's education. Some districts across the country have been fortunate to receive grants that help staff members and administrators reach out to families and plan family collaboration. When those

Parent Perspective

My daughter had just entered middle school, and our family was in crisis. Both my husband and I are alcoholics, although it had taken us years to admit that we had a problem. I started going to AA meetings in July, but by August, my husband's anger was increasing. He was drinking every evening and becoming violent. I tried to leave with my two children but had nowhere to go. I didn't know where to turn.

In September, at open school night, I met my child's counselor and told her we were having family problems that might affect my daughter's academic progress. She immediately brought me to the school social worker. I had previously been in a school that did not have a support

team to address these issues with parents. I sat and talked with the social worker and the counselor. We made an appointment to follow up and make a plan for how to help my daughter. I felt for the first time there were people in the school who could help me.

We met regularly and I was referred to outside services, which included family counseling, Alanon for my children, and a support group. In school, the social worker worked with my daughter and two other children who were in similar situations. I really do not know what I would have done if I had been in a school that did not know how to reach out and help parents.



Resources

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resources are not available, however, it is possible for administrators, specialized instructional support personnel, and teachers to work together to establish programs to encourage and sustain family involvement in their schools. **PL**

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