Family-School Partnerships: An Esssential Component of Student Achievement

The family-school partnership is essential to the health of the overall school community and the success of individual students.

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Alician Jackson is a working class single mother who is raising four children (ages 7–16) and who wanted to be involved in her children's education. She found school learning activities difficult, however, and felt that she lacked the knowledge or skills to help her children and to converse with teachers effectively. Her son Troy was struggling in school when his teacher, Mrs. C, contacted her to discuss Troy's inconsistent homework completion. Mrs. C assured Alician that Troy was a bright student and asked Alician for her observations and input regarding Troy's homework habits and offered to partner with her to help Troy improve his grades.

Emily, a tenth grader, attends an urban high school and lives in the lowest income area of the city. The family has no phone. The parents have not attended school functions or parent-teacher conferences; there has been no response to written communications from the school. The school psychologist and the school social worker attempted a home visit but were stymied by the home's chain link fence and two Doberman pinschers. Emily told school staff members that it was hopeless—her parents did not want to talk to "school people."

Obstacles to Overcome

A partnership between families and schools occurs when parents and educators join in mutual efforts that have the shared goal of improving outcomes for students. Although administrators and teachers are the education experts, students are in the classroom for a relatively small portion of the day and the year. Parents, on the other hand, are the experts on their children. When schools and families become partners, they create conditions that allow for ongoing problem solving and collaboration that benefits everyone. But forming partnerships is not always easy. It is important to consider several issues that will lead to successful collaboration.

Communication issues. A real partnership is one in which families and schools share information, using what they learn from each other to change how they work with students. If only one side shares information, the partnership will not bring about the desired outcomes. A schoolwide partnership model that is comprehensive and well-planned and gives parents options on how to be involved works best.

Cultural differences. Because of differences within communities, partnerships look different across families and schools. A family's culture may not be similar to the school's majority culture, causing misunderstandings between parents and staff members. Clear communication will prevent misunderstandings that lead to blame. It is the responsibility of parents and school personnel to reach out to collaborate in supporting students' education and clarify any differences in expectations.

Barriers. Forming a real partnership proceeds more smoothly when partners understand the barriers that families, educators, and the partnership itself may encounter. Parents may face such barriers as limited financial resources, negative experiences with schooling, linguistic and cultural differences from the majority school population, and the perception that schools will not respond to their needs and desires. Educators may lack resources for family outreach, hold stereotypes about families and cultures, focus on problems instead of solutions, and fear conflict. The partnership can be constrained by limited time, poor communication strategies, and blame. Misunderstandings can also arise when

either party interacts with the child in only one setting (school or home) and fails to recognize the constraints that limit the other party's efforts. Although barriers pose a challenge to a partnership, they also offer an opportunity for families and schools to grow closer by addressing them together.

Developmental issues. The partnership will change over the years of a child's education, as both schools and parents shift more responsibility to the student. Although collaboration between family and school tends to drop in the middle level, family-school partnerships can benefit students throughout middle level and high school. Parents can still offer support that will affect their child's education, such as monitoring homework, encouraging and helping to plan for postsecondary enrollment, and holding the child accountable for his or her choices. Schools can support students' developing independence by giving them more responsibilities while continuing to communicate with families. High expectations at home and school play a large role in students' achievement. Families and educators can work together to construct goals and expectations and provide the support students need to attain them.

Promoting Effective Partnerships

Effective partnerships require collaborative attitudes and collaborative actions. Additional effort is needed for families that for whatever reason are difficult to engage. Principals play important roles in promoting effective partnerships: they set the expectation for involvement as well as the tone for interaction (e.g., refusing to blame the other party, inviting input, being solution oriented, seeing different perspectives), encourage the development of meaning-

When Conflict Arises

As with any relationship, conflict can arise in family-school partnerships. These will be much easier to resolve if schools have proactively reached out to establish supportive relationships with families as a part of the school culture. The following strategies can be help resolve conflicts when they do occur.

Block blame. Emphasize that the purpose of your interaction is not to assign blame but to solve a problem. For example, if a mother says that her son's failure to turn in homework is because it is too difficult for him, the teacher might say, "Let's talk about how we can work together to find a solution to your son's late assignments."

Reframe. Provide a positive point of view when approaching problems. For example, instead of telling a father that his child is always talking and disrupting class, the teacher can say, "Although I appreciate your daughter's energy and sociability, I'd like to work with you to find a way to increase her time on task."

Ask questions. Ask for specific information to clarify the context leading to blaming. For example, if a mother says that her child always has too much homework, ask if there is a particular subject that is causing more problems.

Give specific examples and avoid generalizations. Avoid such generalizations as, "Your daughter never pays attention." Rather, give such specific examples as, "I have noticed that your daughter doodles a lot in class."

Validate. Like schools, families today are faced with many stressors. Show parents that you recognize their perceptions and efforts as well as the pressures they may be facing.

Communicate respect. Use appropriate listening skills and nonaggressive and nondefensive body language. Try to understand and respect any cultural attitudes that families have about conflict.

Strategies to Support Involvement

Effective principals take partnering with families seriously. Support from principals has been shown to make a difference in helping diverse families become more engaged in their children's schooling. Boethel (2003) noted that principals can provide support by:

■ Communicating often with families (in their native language) through print (newsletters) and nonprint (home visits, phone) methods and the use of technology (audio, e-mail, homework hotlines)

■ Calling parents with good as well as bad news and always providing honest but optimistic communication

■ Holding regular informal conversational meetings with families to seek their perspectives and give them information about school policies and practices

■ Maintaining a strong presence at conferences and school functions to meet and greet parents, and following up when parents do not attend

■ Ensuring a welcoming school climate.

Source: Boethel, M. (2003). *Diversity: Schools, family, and community connections*. Austin, TX: National Center for Family & Community Connections with Schools, Southwest Educational Development Laboratory.

ful roles for parents, and provide the opportunity for initial and sustained communication.

Model attitudes that foster partnership. Administrators can promote and model effective partnerships by respecting family differences and asking for input. Rather than simply distribute information to families, administrators must be willing to listen to them, incorporate their ideas into schoolwide planning, and encourage teachers to do the same. Parents want the best for their children, even if their goals don't seem to align with the school's. Educators must strive to understand and support those goals.

Address conflicts constructively. As with any relationship, conflict can arise in family-school partnerships. It is important to be respectful, nonjudgmental, and focused on the shared desire to resolve the issue in the best interest of the student. How the school approaches and helps resolve conflicts not only affects the outcome of the specific issue but also helps shape parents' attitudes about the value of family-school partnerships.

Make partnerships a schoolwide priority. Partnering with families should be a schoolwide priority that is shared among all school personnel. Administrative support for family collaboration programs and related staff development is essential, but school psychologists, social workers, and other specialists can help teachers create an environment that is family friendly. Because teachers may need to accommodate parents who have challenging schedules by visiting them at home or holding early morning or evening conferences, compensatory time and substitute teachers are important considerations. When working with parents who are not proficient in English, it will also be important to plan ahead by securing interpreters or community representatives.

Create a welcoming environment. Many families are uncomfortable becoming involved in their children's education because they do not believe they can help or because they do not know how to help. Therefore, administrators must explicitly solicit families' involvement and encourage all teachers to similarly invite parents to collaborate. Families must understand the

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importance of their involvement and how a partnership between home and school is essential for youth to reach their highest potential, and schools must understand that they should not mandate how families must be involved.

Some suggestions for encouraging specific, meaningful involvement include the following:

■ Encourage teachers to provide positive, persistent, personalized communication about their students' performance.

■ Collaborate with families to set clear and high standards and expectations across home and school. This includes efforts at the classroom level as well as schoolwide expectations.

■ Problem solve with families. Establish task forces and advisory councils of parents and teachers working together to address issues in the school (e.g., bullying, drugs, attendance).

■ Ask families how you can help them support their children's education, including asking for help in creating interventions. Parents' participation increases when they see how their support improves their children's performance.

Hard-to-Reach Families

Although some families are easily engaged, many appear to not care about or resist

becoming involved in their children's school experience. Epstein (as cited in Christenson & Sheridan, 2001) estimated that "10% of families, because of significant personal problems, do not, cannot, and will not" engage with their children's schools (p. 24). The inclination to just write off these families because they have rejected the opportunities that other parents have taken is natural. In many cases, however, school policies and practices can help lower or eliminate the barriers to family-school partnerships.

Meet parents where they are. Constructive family-school relationships that support students' learning require more effort than simply providing access. Administrators must meet parents where they are, not where educators wish they would be. The goal is to gain input and participation from families, not just to give them information or try to fix them. In addition to general strategies for encouraging family-school partnerships, additional actions that principals can take to promote collaboration with families that are difficult to reach include:

■ Systematically identifying families who are not being reached through current collaboration initiatives.

■ Encouraging teachers to reach out to parents with positive personal contacts, such as phone calls or home visits.

■ Accommodating parents' busy schedules. Many parents hold more than one job and have little time for anything else. Substitute teachers can free teachers to make home visits during the day if that is convenient for parents, and teachers can receive compensation for holding conferences after hours, when parents are able to come to the school.

■ Asking families what resources would help them to be more involved in their children's education, and then taking action accordingly.

■ Taking into account the barriers faced by families from diverse backgrounds.

Family outreach and involvement programs. Principals can take the lead in planning and implementing programs to promote greater family involvement and partnerships,

particularly among parents who have been reluctant or resistant to previous efforts:

- Consider input from all stakeholders and create a clear plan for implementation. Ensure that any planning group represents all families in the school community.
- Measure the program's effectiveness in partnering with families and increasing student outcomes, and make improvements accordingly.
- Create a system for communication with families that includes several methods to accommodate all families, including those who don't have access to the Internet or telephone service and those who do not speak fluent English. Consider the need to provide transportation and child care to give all parents access to school events and involvement opportunities.
- Promote collaboration as a priority in the school. Post mission statements, host family activities, and hold open houses.
- Give parents several ways of becoming involved, such as participating on a school

safety and health or guidance advisory committee; supervising dances or other social events; or helping in the front office, the media center, or the school store or with cocurricular activities. Offer opportunities that have different times and levels of participation.

Teaching Staff Members to Partner

Lack of administrator and teacher training for partnering with parents has been described as one of the biggest barriers to developing constructive relationships. An efficient way to address this barrier is to provide staff training to improve home-school communication. Topics might include developing a two-way communication system; using solution-oriented communication strategies; sharing decision-making and problem-solving responsibilities; and focusing ongoing communication on students' engagement with schooling and progress in learning (Christenson & Sheridan, 2001).

Other important staff development topics include developing such constructive attitudes as thinking the best of families; respecting different perspectives; and being a listener and resource.

Summary

To give students the best education possible, it is essential that families and schools partner together. Although such partnerships will not always be easy, such benefits as higher achievement and increased support make them worthwhile. School administrators can help build effective partnerships with families by providing the school-level infrastructure for partnerships through staff development training and establishing schoolwide family-school goals. If administrators focus on building a trusting relationship with families, respecting their concerns and constraints, and sharing power and responsibility for students' learning, students will be far more likely to succeed and enjoy school. **P**L

REFERENCE
- Christenson, S. L., & Sheridan, S. M. (2001). *Schools and families: Creating essential connections for learning.* New York: Guilford Press.