How to Overcome Obstacles to Parent-Teacher Partnerships

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Parent-teacher partnerships bring a community of adults together to work toward a common goal—helping students succeed. When these partnerships are based on genuine respect and mutual sharing of ideas, a web of support is created to provide students the best opportunity to thrive in school (Henderson 1988; Chavkin and Williams 1988; Epstein and Dauber 1991). Teachers are more likely to forge partnerships with parents if they see families as important resources of support and when they welcome and involve caregivers as equal partners (Shick 1997; Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler 1997). Yet, teachers' perceptions of parents and parent involvement, shaped by culture, history, and schooling practices, can inhibit these home-school linkages. By describing the educational climate that influences teacher-parent partnerships, we wish to help teachers critically examine their ways of perceiving parents and parent involvement so they can navigate past conditions that have limited these collaborations. We see teachers and administrators as the principal reformers in making parent-teacher partnerships possible.

Evidence Supporting Parent-Teacher Collaboration

Research clearly indicates that student achievement is maximized through parent involvement. Henderson (1988) reviewed forty-nine studies of parent involvement programs and reported numerous benefits, including "higher grades and test scores, long-term academic achievement, positive attitudes and behavior, more successful programs, and more effective schools" (60). Chavkin and Williams (1988) extended this description of the Henderson study to include "an increase in student attendance, a reduction in dropouts, an improvement of student motivation and self-esteem and more parent and community support for schools" (87).

Children's academic success depends on the degree to which teachers understand and accept the divergent cultures of the communities they serve (Delpit 1995; Chisholm 1994; Ladson-Billings 1994; Heath 1983). The number of school-aged minority children is expected to increase by more than 30 percent by the year 2000 (Chisholm 1994). Several studies have found that collaboration with the caregivers from non-mainstream cultures helps teachers gain the cultural competence they need to enhance student motivation and achievement (Ladson-Billings 1995; Delpit 1995; Shockley 1994; Cairey and Munsie 1995). Delpit, for instance, urges Anglo teachers to invite parents and community spokespeople to come to school to share stories of home and community life so the teachers will be better prepared to teach "other people's children."

So important are parents in the fabric of educational support that both state and federal agencies are now calling for greater collaboration between parents and teachers. The Goals 2000: Educate America Act specifically states, "Every school will promote partnerships that will increase parental involvement and participation in promoting the social, emotional, and academic growth of children" (U.S. Department of Education 1994). In addition, teacher accreditation agencies now require teachers to meet these federal standards. The NCATE standards state that "beginning teachers must be able to collaborate with parents and agencies in the larger community for supporting student learning and well being" (Morris et al. 1995). Although these findings clearly indicate a growing movement toward parent-teacher collaboration, real application is complicated by a range of factors.

Obstacles to Parent-Teacher Collaboration

Socio-Historical Factors

Can you remember back to your first day of school? Even though your parents were primarily responsible for
your early language and learning experiences, your caregiver ceased to be your primary teacher once you entered first grade, and the distinction between parenting and teaching increased as you grew older. By the time you entered high school, your parents and teachers assumed very different roles in your life. Their relative statuses also differed. Hierarchical relationships, with teachers often dominating over parents, have been so much a part of our culture they are almost never questioned (Burke 1985).

Maybe you hear teachers complain about how parents do not help their children with homework. You might also hear parents accuse teachers of being too lazy, expecting too much, or being too lenient. According to Mary Henry (1996), parents and teachers today engage in frequent "we-they" battles: "Educators argue that there has been a decline in parenting in today's society and parents blame schools for increasingly neglecting their primary purpose—to teach" (45-46).

Adversarial relationships between teachers and parents are rooted in the earliest days of our schooling culture. Since America's colonial period, educators have blamed parents for their seeming inability to support children's intellectual, social, and moral development. For example, laws passed in Puritan America suggest that the establishment did not fully trust parents to educate their own children (Tyack 1967). If parents neglected their duties to raise moral and literate children, the state could take these "delinquent" youngsters away from their parents. In the common schools of the early 1800s, teachers warned immigrant children not to emulate the language and customs of their parents, a practice that divided home and school. "When children entered the doors of the public school, they passed into a world unfamiliar to their elders, one that seemed to teach them to scorn inherited traditions" (230). During the industrial revolution, schooling practices stressed uniformity and discipline partly because of what educators considered to be a "lack of 'family-nurturing' and the weakening moral influence of both the nuclear and extended family" (317).

One hundred years later, we continue to blame parents, especially those from low-income and minority backgrounds, for the academic failures of children. How often do you hear teachers complain, "Kids are failing in school because those parents never read to them!" Underlying such comments is the assumption that poor and minority parents do not care about supporting their children's academic progress. Many teachers tend to believe that parents in those communities neither value education highly nor provide their children with the intellectual and motivational prerequisites for learning in school (Ascher 1988). This assumption is narrow and largely inaccurate. Parents, by and large, care very much about the educational needs of their children. Then why do these negative perceptions of parents and parent involvement persist? One reason is that our schools of education have not adequately educated teachers to understand parents and to network with them. Another reason is that district policies and traditions of schooling limit teachers' access to parents.

The Failure of Teacher Education

Teachers' fears and apprehensions about parent involvement stem from a fundamental flaw in teacher education. Teachers have not been provided with adequate educational support to invite and maintain partnerships with parents. A review of the teacher education literature reveals that very little attention is given to preparing teachers to work with parents and other adults (Foster and Loven 1992; Midkiff and Lawler-Prince 1992). Fero and Bush (1994) concluded that "perhaps there is no other factor for which new teachers are less prepared" (8), and furthermore, Swap (1993) reports, "Teachers, parents, and administrators have generally received limited information about how to work together effectively. Information about creating effective parent involvement programs is rarely incorporated in pre-service preparation programs" (26). More recently, Epstein (1996) noted that "most educators enter schools without an understanding of family background, concepts of caring, or the framework of partnerships...most teachers and administrators are not prepared to understand, design, implement, and evaluate practices of partnerships with the families of their students" (21).

Given the lack of attention to this area in both undergraduate and graduate education, teachers cannot help but feel uneasy about parents and unprepared to invite parent collaboration. Teacher educators must consider re-vamping the curriculum to include parental involvement projects as part of field experiences. For those already teaching, professional development is urgently needed.

School Culture Systems That Divide Home and School

Even when teachers work to develop insight into the way parents approach involvement, however, school systems generally do not reward teachers for those efforts and, in fact, have traditionally distanced parents and teachers (Burke 1985; Henry 1996). When was the last time your school district administrator encouraged you and members of your faculty to take a university course on parent involvement? Can you even imagine a system that awards you incentive pay for your exemplary work with parents? In the current educational climate, these ideas seem absurd.

The organizational nature of schools and the levels of support from school districts to reward teachers' efforts in home-school networking are often restrictive. Some teachers believe they do not have the authority to work with parents collaboratively unless given permission to do so by the central office and school board. In addition, some school districts perpetuate the divide between home and school by excluding parents from most forms of education decision making (Henry 1996). The parent-teacher conference, for example, dictated by schools and held on school turf, is especially intimidating for low-income or minority parents. Parents have little say in arranging for alternative ways of communicating with teachers. Furthermore, par-
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Issues for Teachers of Older Children

The belief that parent involvement is an “elementary school thing” is pervasive in our schooling culture. Unlike elementary teachers, many secondary teachers do not view parent involvement and parent-teacher communication as critical to students’ academic success (Broderick and Mastriili 1997). Teachers often interpret students’ increasing need for autonomy as a sign that students do not need or desire parent-teacher collaboration as a form of support (Eccles and Harold 1993). However, teens are better served when parents and teachers work together to support them—without compromising students’ need for autonomy (Dauber and Epstein 1993).

The size and bureaucratic nature of schooling at the secondary level also limit teachers’ access to students and, consequently, their parents. For example, many middle school and high school teachers teach twenty-five to thirty different students each class period, so they could conceivably teach over one hundred different students per day. These teachers are less likely to see the feasibility of getting to know their students and their students’ parents than are elementary school teachers who serve only one class of students for the entire day. Also, the complexity of the secondary-level curriculum, the fragmented day, and the added extracurricular choices make it difficult to connect with students and their families.

A decline in parent involvement is also influenced by the high level of academic work required at the secondary level and by parents’ uncertainties about their ability to help their children academically (Chavkin and Williams 1993; Dauber and Epstein 1993; Scott-Jones 1987). Actually, adolescents are particularly vulnerable to stresses associated with middle and high school and are in most need of support from both parents and teachers at that time (Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler 1997).

Research finds that parents are a valuable resource to aid teachers in determining effective interventions for teens who may need help to achieve (Jackson and Cooper 1992). Dauber and Epstein (1993) report that parents of middle school students who were doing better academically indicated more school-related contact with teachers than parents of children who were doing less well.

The Need for Systemic Change

Overcoming Assumptions about Parents

So far, we have examined some of the factors that limit parent-teacher partnerships. We believe teachers can overcome obstacles by understanding parents and the possibilities of parent involvement and by agitating for systemic change in the ways that schools involve parents. First, knowing about the perceptions and motivations of parents helps teachers recognize that the assumption of parental lack of interest is misplaced. For example, parents in low-income communities vary considerably in their beliefs about supporting their children’s education. Some low-income parents do not see their role as including active school involvement and believe schooling is best left up to teachers (Lareau 1989), while others take a far more active role in the schooling process (Clark 1993; Segal 1985). Moreover, the ways parents view their roles is shaped by the circumstances and norms of particular cultures. Most African Americans, for example, tend to view education as the way to a better life and thus value academic achievement (Ritter, Mont-Reynaud, and Dombusch 1993).

As we discussed earlier, parents’ beliefs about their own effectiveness as teachers or tutors (their “sense of efficacy”) is also a factor that shapes parent involvement, and this is especially true for parents of older children. Parents with a low sense of efficacy tend to avoid helping their children because they do not want to face their own inadequacies, or they assume that their involvement will not produce positive results (Bandura 1989). Efficacy is lowest for those who do not graduate from high school; differences between high school and college graduates were not found to be significant (Bandura 1989).

Teachers who understand the significance of role and efficacy in parent involvement are in a better position to invite parents to support their children’s education (Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler 1997). Many parents feel they should or can support their children’s development, but they simply do not know how to do so (Tharp and Gallimore 1988). Parents who fall into this category are teachers’ most valuable, if untapped, resource.

Overcoming Assumptions about Parent Involvement

- Our work with teacher interns and cooperating teachers suggests that parent outreach is often taken as a well-intentioned yet unreasonable extra chore. You might feel this way if you were a teacher who had to write daily lessons for several classes of students, assess the varied abilities of students, attend committee meetings, and chair student organizations. When and how are you supposed to partner with parents?
We find that teachers who regularly partner with parents believe these partnerships actually reduce the general level of stress associated with teaching. Teachers who send out brief, weekly newsletters to parents describing classroom and homework activities or grading procedures keep all parents and students "on the same page," averting confusion and cutting down the time spent explaining and defending practices and policies. Inviting parents to provide input on their child's performance through phone calls, written comments, or during conferences actually helps teachers to solve classroom conflicts and to examine teaching practices that best meet the needs of their students. Teachers who invite parent commentary are more likely to understand the social-situational context that shapes a student's performance in school (Lazar and Weisberg 1996).

Even if inviting parent input makes good practical sense, you might think that doing so will take away from your authority as a teacher. What if parents criticize your instructional methods, curriculum decisions, or classroom management techniques? You have worked hard to serve children through your pedagogical knowledge and mastery of your content area. You believe you should be in charge of your own classroom. Inviting parent involvement, however, does not mean that parents will walk all over you or take charge of your classroom. We find that teachers do not lose professional status and authority by inviting parent input; in fact, they gain it by relating well to parents, trusting parents, and using information from parents about their children. Of course, the possibility does exist that parents will in fact criticize your teaching decisions. We find, though, that most parents who take time to volunteer in the classroom are genuinely interested in helping the teacher and the students.

Some teachers fear they might not be able to handle conflicts with parents. For instance, you might not know how to interact with a parent who is angry or overbearing. You might think that avoiding contact altogether reduces the chance of having a confrontation with a parent. Actually, just the opposite is true. Avoiding parent contact increases the likelihood that miscommunication and conflict will occur. Think how confused parents would be if they did not have any sense of what was happening in a classroom where their child was failing, or how resentful they might be if the teacher never solicited their opinions or never listened to their views.

Conclusion

In the current education climate, many parents and teachers find themselves in separate worlds, often with parents maintaining a distinct "outsider" status. Given the factors that constrain parent-teacher collaboration, it can seem that forging relationships with parents is too difficult to do. Yet teachers cannot fully achieve their teaching goals without such help.

We believe that you can work toward changing those practices and policies that seem to limit parent-teacher collaboration. The first step is to inquire about the extent in which your school and district invite parent involvement. Are your attempts to attract parental support consistent with those of the larger school and district? What changes are needed to attract parent involvement on a school and district level? Are the practices and policies of schools systematically designed to keep caregivers at a distance? How can you lobby for professional development funding to improve your school district's parent involvement program?

You may not be able to solicit the support of all parents. But, until you actually communicate with parents, find out more about parents' views toward school involvement, and investigate how the school and the larger district can support your efforts to partner with parents, the possibilities for collaborating with parents will be limited. If you welcome parents as potential partners, and if parents assume a significant role in working with you, your students will have the best shot at succeeding in school.

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