

FOR DIVERSE FAMILIES, PARENT INVOLVEMENT TAKES ON A NEW MEANING

Educators often ask how they can increase parent involvement, particularly among culturally, linguistically, and economically diverse families. They believe doing so will improve student achievement.

The National Parent Teacher Association (PTA) recently issued revised National Standards for Family-School Partnerships. As with previous versions, the revised document includes six standards: welcoming all families, communicating effectively, supporting student success, speaking up for every child, sharing power, and collaborating with the community. These standards represent important ways families and school can work together. They also represent a shift in the way we think about working with families. Rather than talking about parent involvement, these standards move us to think of engagement.

This is an important shift because it allows us to acknowledge that what we are asking of parents is much more than involvement in their children's education. We are asking parents to engage in the work of schools. A school that engages its parents will become a better place for students. However, if we only look at parent engagement, the contributions of many families will be overlooked.

Parents and families support students and schools in a variety of ways. Involvement is one kind of support. Engagement is another, and empowerment is a third. Involvement refers to the actions parents and families take to support their own children. Engagement refers to parents and families working with educators on the broader goals of the school by providing input and serving on decision-making committees. The third kind of support, empowerment, refers to parents and families having actual ownership of the school. Rather than responding to what the school wants, empowered parents and families work as full partners with the school, sharing decision making in all aspects.

All three kinds of support are important. As we make the shift to thinking about parent engagement, we must

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also continue to think about parent involvement, and we must acknowledge that all parents are involved in their children's education. Some forms of involvement, however, may go unrecognized by schools, and parents may be labeled as unconcerned or unwilling to support education. This is often the case with culturally, linguistically, and economically diverse families.

Several research studies (Quiocho & Daoud, 2006; Drummond & Stipek, 2004; Daniel-White, 2002; Lopez, 2001, Delgado-Gaitan, 2001) illustrate that that parents of culturally, linguistically, and economically diverse students not only have high expectations for their children's academic success, but they also support their children's education in important ways that may differ from the kind of parent involvement noted in traditional or middle class parent involvement models. To help educators better understand the kinds of involvement identified in this research, we have developed five categories that describe ways in which parents and families may be involved in their children's education that go beyond traditional forms. These categories build upon traditional forms of parent involvement to create an expanded, rather than separate, definition.

1. PARENTING

In traditional parent involvement, parents and school are viewed as partners with overlapping roles and responsibilities. Both are equally responsible for the education of the child. Schools assist families with parenting skills and setting home conditions to support children as students. Parents assist schools in understanding family circumstances and make recommendations for how best to work with the child at school. For many culturally, linguistically, and economically diverse parents and families, school and home are viewed as having distinct roles and responsibilities for the child. The parent's job is to socialize children's behavior. The educator's job is to teach. In this relationship, most of the work of parents is done at home. The socialization that occurs at school (e.g. walking children to class, eating lunch with children) is often unrecognized as involvement and may even be viewed negatively by the school as interference with children developing the independence so valued in the school setting.



In each issue of *JSD*, Sarah W. Nelson, above, and Patricia L. Guerra write about the importance of and strategies for developing cultural awareness in teachers and schools. The columns are available at www.nsd.org.



2. COMMUNICATING

With traditional parent involvement, two-way communication is expected between school and home. The school informs parents about schoolwide events and individual student progress, and parents contact the school when they need information or want to inform the school about their child. Because the role of schools and parents is distinct in many culturally, linguistically, and economically diverse communities, parents rarely initiate contact with the school. Parents respond to school communication and make themselves available when dropping off or picking up their children. Parents will also attend school meetings when possible and will often send a relative or friend as surrogate when they cannot attend.

3. DEMONSTRATING SUPPORT OF ACADEMICS

For many culturally, linguistically, and economically diverse families, education is viewed as a privilege rather than a right. Parents work to provide a home, clothing, and food for children so that the children may attend school. Many culturally, linguistically, and economically diverse parents have risked their lives so their children will have better educational opportunities. Parents ensure children are ready to benefit from school by dressing them appropriately, getting them to school on time, and instructing them to listen to the teacher. Children may be excused from household responsibilities and given exclusive use of a shared space in the home when they have important school assignments to complete.

4. DECLARING THE IMPORTANCE OF EDUCATION

While acquiring education is an unstated, but understood, expectation in many middle-class families, many culturally, linguistically, and economically diverse parents consistently communicate the importance of education to their children through words and actions. Parents may be unable to give assistance on homework or important educational decisions due to language differences, limited literacy, or unfamiliarity with the assignment or school operating procedures, but they insist children complete the task. They may remind children why education is important and encourage them to strive for a better job than what the parent has. The parent may even take children to work in manual labor jobs to show them how difficult the work is and to convince them to stay in school.

5. CONVEYING TRUST BY GRANTING AUTONOMY

As children mature and demonstrate responsibility, their parents may grant more autonomy. This may take the form of parents having few household rules for the children or allowing children to be responsible for tasks such as completing course selection forms or college entrance

materials. The parents may provide guidance, but they rarely tell the child what to do. In doing so, parents encourage children to grow into their role as an adult. This form of involvement is often misunderstood as lack of caring or giving children inappropriate levels of responsibility.

When schools recognize and value these forms of involvement, they can use them as a bridge to more traditional forms of parent involvement and to move the school toward parent engagement and empowerment.

A colleague has created an activity we find useful in helping teachers and school leaders develop an appreciation for an expanded definition of parent involvement (Alemán, 2009). Working with a group of teachers and school leaders, our colleague gives each participant a piece of paper and markers. He asks them to illustrate how their own parents were involved in their education as a child. Participants are instructed to use only pictures, no text. The pictures are then posted around the room, and participants volunteer to explain their drawings. As educators share, it becomes clear that many of their own parents were not involved with school in the traditional way. In fact, many of their own parents showed support in the ways that research suggests many culturally, linguistically, and economically diverse families often do.

This is a powerful way to deliver the message that if we want to develop authentic relationships with parents and families, we must assume that parents are involved in the education of their children, and we must value what parents and families bring, even when it is outside traditional forms of involvement.

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