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FAMILY MATTERS

Student learning improves when families get involved

By Joan Richardson

When the school improvement team at Curtis Bay Elementary School in Baltimore decided the school needed to focus more attention on family involvement, the first challenge was educating parents and teachers about what that meant.

"Our teachers and parents thought the only way for parents to be involved was to volunteer in the classroom. We had to teach them — and we continue to teach them — that parent involvement can mean helping a student with a homework project, helping us put together a partnership, reading the school newsletter. Not every parent is going to be involved in the same way," said Jackie Griswold, the teacher who has chaired the School-Family-Community Action Team for seven years.

Involving every family in a child's education is an important piece of improving that child's learning, according to research by Joyce Epstein, director of the Center for School, Family, and Com-

munity Partnerships at Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore. Research has demonstrated that parents are more likely to talk to children about school, monitor their schoolwork, and help their children learn when parents receive information from teachers about classroom learning activities, their child's strength and progress, and how to help children learn.

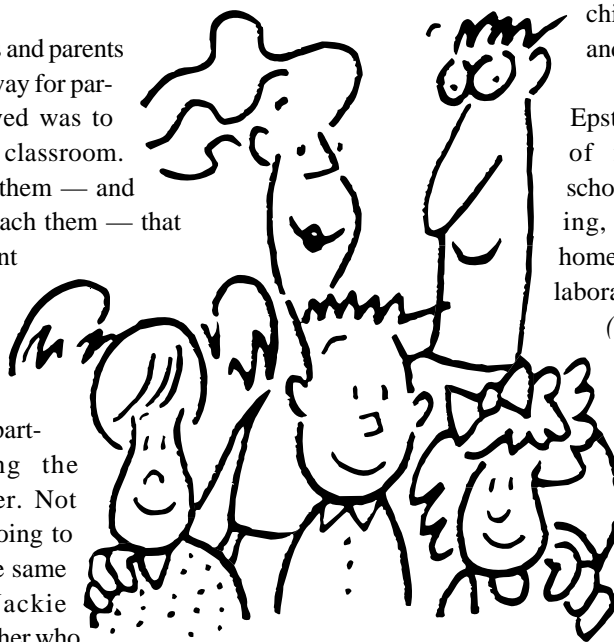
Through her research, Epstein has identified six types of family involvement in schools: parenting, communicating, volunteering, learning at home, decision making, and collaborating with the community.

(See Page 2 for more detailed explanation.)

Epstein said many schools do quite well in one-way communication from school to families. The area where they tend to do the least well, she said, is in teaching parents how they can effectively help their children with their school work.

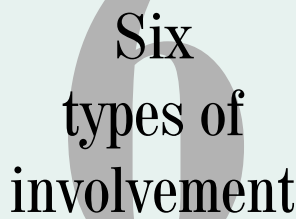
"Parents are ready for this. It's teachers we have to convince," Epstein said.

Putting family involvement into place generally works best when done in conjunction with an



Continued on Page 2

COVER STORY



Six types of involvement

Joyce Epstein has identified six types of family involvement. They are:

1 PARENTING: Help all families establish home environments to support children as students.

2 COMMUNICATING: Design effective forms of school-to-home and home-to-school communications about school programs and children's progress.

3 VOLUNTEERING: Recruit and organize parent help and support.

4 LEARNING AT HOME: Provide information and ideas to families about how to help students at home with homework and other curriculum-related activities, decisions, and planning.

5 DECISION MAKING: Include parents in school decisions, developing parent leaders and representatives.

6 COLLABORATING WITH COMMUNITY: Identify and integrate resources and services from the community to strengthen school programs, family practices, and student learning and development.

Focus on family involvement

Continued from Page One

existing school improvement team, Epstein said. But, that's not essential. "Sometimes, seeing how well this works will convince a school of the need for a real school improvement plan. It actually can lead to more effective school improvement planning," she said.

Epstein outlines five steps in her improvement process.

1) *Create a School-Family-Community Partnership Action Team.* This team guides the development of a comprehensive plan that integrates Epstein's six types of involvement.

The team assesses current practices, implements and coordinates selected activities, and evaluates the results.

The most crucial part of the action team approach, Epstein said, is the team's membership. Epstein recommends seven to 12 members, including at least three teachers from different grade levels, one administrator, and three parents with different age children.

In addition, Epstein said the action team needs to pay particular attention to who chairs the team. Although the first response is often to have a parent leader, Epstein said a teacher or counselor typically is more successful. "This person has to be able to get the work out of teachers that is needed to improve communication between school and home and will enhance the learning-at-home efforts," she said.

2) *Obtain a budget of about \$1,000 to pay for time and materials.* Some schools use Title I funds for this; many schools also have separate fund-raising to support this.

3) *Identify the school's strengths and expectations for family involvement.*

Epstein recommends having structured discussions among various interest groups and using a checklist to identify current practices and uncover areas of need. (Epstein's new book, *School-Family-Community Partnerships: Your Handbook for Action* contains a lengthy check-

list that schools can use to evaluate their current situation. (See Page 7 for ordering details. A shorter, but similar checklist appears on Pages 3 and 4.)

4) *Develop a vision of what the school's family involvement efforts will be in three years and devise a plan to achieve that vision.*

Griswold recommends that schools be realistic about how much they can accomplish in a single year. "Try to identify just one activity addressing each area of involvement," she said.

Match your activities to the importance of each goal. If, for example, your goal is to improve volunteering, don't load up on strategies to improve two-way communication.

5) *Evaluate the progress of the previous year, celebrate the successes, and plan for the next school year.*

"We add a little bit each year but we try not to stretch ourselves too thin," Griswold said.

Teachers at Curtis Bay also do a monthly evaluation of family involvement, using a regular checklist to determine how the school has connected with each family that month. This checklist is also a regular way to remind teachers of the many ways that families and schools can be involved with each other. For example, if a family helps a child with a homework project or returns a coupon that appears in the school's monthly newsletter, those are included in family involvement.

Epstein believes that "just about all teachers and administrators want to involve families more. They just don't know the best ways to do that and sometimes, they are very wary because of past experiences."

The key to winning over reluctant educators, she believes, is showing them how their family involvement efforts will pay off for their students.

"If they really see that this is linked to improving student learning, then they're willing to participate," she said.

Parent Involvement Checklist

COMMENT TO FACILITATORS

Use this checklist to help your school improvement committee or action team identify its current parent involvement practices. Team members should work together to fill out the checklist. Calculate your responses using the scoring guidelines on Page 4. Then initiate a discussion about which practices should be maintained, eliminated, or improved in order to enhance parent involvement in your school.

DIRECTIONS

Record your YES or NO responses to the following questions. As you fill out the checklist, collect sample material that illustrates the answer (such as a copy of your parent involvement plan, a pupil progress report form, an attendance sheet from a school function).

PARENT INVOLVEMENT PLAN

Yes No

- 1. Is there a stated commitment to parent involvement, such as a directive, policy, or guideline?
- 2. Are there adequate resources (funding, staff) to support parent involvement activities?
- 3. Is there a parent involvement coordinator?
- 4. Is there a written plan for parent involvement?
- 5. Is there provision in the plan for staff training in all aspects of parent involvement?
- 6. Is there provision in the plan for data collection, program monitoring, and evaluation?
- 7. Did parents help develop the plan?

OUTREACH

Yes No

- 8. Are special efforts made to involve men and women from different racial and national origin groups in all parent activities?
- 9. Have linkages been made with community organizations and religious groups which serve the families of children enrolled in your school?
- 10. Are liaisons or interpreters available from different national origin groups to help with parent involvement activities if needed?
- 11. Is a particular effort made to involve male family members in school activities?
- 12. Do some parent involvement activities take place in the community?

SCHOOL POLICY AND PROCEDURES

Yes No

- 13. Is there a parent advisory council? Are parents represented on school advisory council(s)?
- 14. Are members of advisory council(s) representative of the school population by race, gender, and national origin?
- 15. Are parents trained to be effective council members?
- 16. Are parents involved in developing educational goals and objectives for the school?
- 17. Are parents involved in developing school procedures and rules?
- 18. Are parents involved in developing pupil progress reporting forms and procedures?

SCHOOL-SPONSORED PARENT ACTIVITIES

Yes No

- 19. Are parents welcomed into the school on a daily basis as observers, volunteers, and resources?
- 20. Is a PTO/PTA active in your school?
- 21. Are parents involved in developing school sponsored parent and family activities?
- 22. Are there educational activities and training for parents which enable them to work with their own child at home?
- 23. Are there social activities for parents and families?
- 24. Are there ways for parents to help the school (fundraising, paint/fix up, etc.)?
- 25. Are there adult education classes for parents (ESL, GED, exercise classes, etc.)?
- 26. Is there an updated file of community services and resources for parents and families (health, social services, financial aid, emergency assistance, etc.)?
- 27. Are child care arrangements made for school meetings and other parent activities if needed?
- 28. Are there parent recognition programs for service to the school?

Continued on Page 4

Parent Involvement Checklist

Continued from Page 3

COMMUNICATING WITH PARENTS

Yes No

29. Do teachers make an effort to communicate regularly and positively with parents?
30. Is there a regular school newsletter with information for parents?
31. Are parent communications written clearly and simply (at a 6th to 8th grade level) using language the family can understand?
32. Are school procedures and rules clearly communicated to parents at the beginning of each year or when children are enrolled?

REPORTING CHILDREN'S PROGRESS TO PARENTS

Yes No

33. Do teachers make an effort to say positive things about the child and emphasize the child's strengths in their progress reports to parents?
34. Are teacher concerns about their child's progress communicated clearly to parents?
35. Do parents participate in decisions affecting their child's education (classroom placement, course selection)?
36. Are all educational options for their child explained clearly to parents?
37. Are meetings arranged at the parents' request to discuss parent concerns regarding their child?
38. Are parent-teacher conferences scheduled at times convenient to the parents and teachers?
39. Are transportation arrangements made for parents to attend parent-teacher conferences if needed?

Reprinted with permission. "The Parent Involvement Checklist" by Judith Greenbaum, *Equity Coalition*, Spring 1990. *Equity Coalition* is a publication of the Programs for Educational Opportunity, University of Michigan. To contact PEO for permission to reprint and use this checklist, call (313) 763-9910 or fax (313) 763-2137.

SCORING

Three separate scales are used to help you rate your organization on parent involvement.

PROGRAM FUNDAMENTALS

Count one point for each YES answer to questions 1, 3, 4, 7, 8, 13, 16, 21, 29, 35.

7-10 points: Congratulations! You have a well planned program in place.

4-6 points: You have the elements of a good parent involvement program on which to build a comprehensive program.

0-3 points: You are missing the planning needed for an effective parent involvement program. Persuade school officials to commit the resources to begin a comprehensive program.

EQUITY

Count one point for each YES answer to questions 8, 9, 10, 11, 12, 14, 27, 31, 38, 39.

9-10 points: Bravo! Equity is an important part of your parent involvement program.

4-8 points: Although you have considered some equity issues when designing your program, you must do more to address race, gender, and national origin concerns.

0-3 points: You need to rethink the equity of your parent involvement program to attract diverse parents to school activities.

RANGE OF ACTIVITIES

Count one point for each YES answer to questions 2, 5, 6, 15, 17, 18, 19, 20, 22, 23, 24, 25, 26, 28, 30, 32, 33, 34, 36, 37.

14-20 points: Keep up the good work! You have an excellent range of parent involvement activities. Monitor them to ensure that they continue to appeal to diverse parent interests.

8-13 points: You have some good parent involvement activities in place. New activities should be developed with community input in order to bring additional groups of parents into the school.

0-7 points: You need to increase the range of parent involvement activities to bring more parents into the school. Read the recommended resources on Page 7 to expand your knowledge about parent involvement. Form a parent advisory group.

Planning Your Family Involvement

Comments to facilitators: After your school improvement committee or action team completes the Parent Involvement Checklist, use the forms on this page and Page 6 to guide your family involvement planning.

Begin by creating the Three-Year Overview, using the form on this page. This will help your group outline its vision or how practices of partnership will develop and improve over three years.

In a separate meeting, using the form on Page 6, design your One-Year Action Plan for each of the six types of family involvement. This will help your team schedule and conduct activities to reach specific results for one school year.

Time: Two hours.

Supplies: Overhead projector.

Preparation: Create one transparency for each of the six types of family involvement described on Page 2. In the spaces provided, identify which of the six types of family involvement is the focus of each page.

Directions: Place the transparency on the overhead projector. If your team is six members or less, work as one group to discuss and identify the group's vision for family involvement. If the group is larger than six, break into smaller units for this discussion. Bring everyone back together for a final discussion. Record the group's goals, finetuning the language as necessary until the group reaches consensus on the goal for each year.

VISION: THREE-YEAR OVERVIEW

What is your action team's broad goal for improving _____ (Specify the type of family involvement here.) over the next three years?

Which activities might you conduct over three years to reach your vision for _____? (Specify the type of family involvement here.)

YEAR 1

YEAR 2

YEAR 3

Reprinted with permission. *School, Family, and Community Partnerships: Your Handbook for Action* by Joyce Epstein, et al., Corwin Press, 1997. See Page 7 for information about ordering the manual.

RESOURCES

Expand your knowledge of family involvement

❑ “Making the Connection Between Families and Schools,” **Harvard Education Letter**, Sept.-Oct. 1997. Entire issue devoted to improving family involvement. Price: \$5 single copy. Phone (617) 495-3432, fax (617) 496-3584, or e-mail edletter@hugse1.harvard.edu.

❑ **Parent Involvement in the Schools: Ideas that Work**, edited by Maike Philipsen. Bloomington, Ind.: Phi Delta Kappa, 1997. Collection of 29 articles detailing how to involve parents effectively in their children’s schooling. Topics include descriptions of successful programs, working with parents of at-risk students, and using technology to communicate between school and home. Price: \$25 plus \$3 for shipping and handling. Phone (800) 766-1156, fax (812) 339-0018 or e-mail headquarters@pdkintl.org

❑ “Parent Participation in the Schools,” by James Comer, **Phi Delta Kappan**, February 1986. Describes model in New Haven, Conn., where parents, teachers, and administrators develop building level objectives, goals, and strategies in school climate, academics, and staff development. Check your local public library for a copy.

❑ **Partners in Action: A Resource Guide** by the Center for School, Family, and Community Partnerships. Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins Univ., 1996. Profiles six communities with exceptional family involvement efforts. Includes a lengthy list of organizations that serve and support family-school-community collaboration. Price: \$10. Phone (410) 516-8808.

❑ **School, Family, and Community Partnerships: Your Handbook for Action** by Joyce Epstein, et al (Thousand Oaks, Calif.: Corwin Press, 1997). Workbook offers strategies for planning, setting up, and maintaining a successful partnership. Price: \$29.95 paperback; \$39.95 hardback. Order from Corwin Press. Phone (805) 499-9774, fax (805) 499-0871 or e-mail order@corwin.sagepub.com.

❑ “School/Family/Community Partnerships: Caring for the Children We Share,” by Joyce Epstein, **Phi Delta Kappan**, May 1995. Summarizes Epstein’s theories, frameworks, and guidelines for assisting schools in building partnerships. Check your local public library for a copy.

If you have a resource that has been particularly helpful to you in your family involvement efforts, please contact Tools editor Joan Richardson. See staff box for contact information.

FAMILY INVOLVEMENT WEB SITES

Harvard Family Research Project

<http://hugse1.harvard.edu/~hfrp>

Partnership for Family Involvement in Education, U.S. Dept. of Education

<http://www.ed.gov/PFIE>

The National Network of Partnership 2000 Schools, Johns Hopkins University

<http://www.csos.jhu.edu/p2000>

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Ask Dr. Developer



Dr. Developer has all the answers to questions that staff developers ask. (At least he thinks he does!)

Knowing your community is the key to reaching families

Q *I'm just not convinced that the parents of my students really want to become more involved with schools. We had a workshop at my school one night last week and only five parents showed up. Why should I invest my time and effort when they don't seem to care?*

A Maybe the workshop just happened at a time when most parents couldn't come. Dr. Developer recalls a suburban elementary school that held a weeknight workshop to explain a new math program to parents. Only a handful of parents turned out and teachers angrily announced they wouldn't participate in future workshops because parents obviously weren't interested. (More than 90 percent of the homes in this sports crazy community were tuned to the televised finals for the Stanley Cup which included the area's local hockey team. Dr. Developer thinks this might have been a case of bad timing, not lack of parental interest. What about you?)

Joyce Epstein, one of the country's leading experts on family involvement in

schools, tells a similar story about a school where only five parents came to a long-planned open house. Alarmed by the poor turnout, the school invested a great deal of effort at understanding its parents and learning what would draw them to an open house. The next year, 200 parents turned out at the open house.

"Parents do care a great deal, far more than teachers believe they do. We just haven't figured out ways to meet the challenges that we face with today's parents," she said. "We have to find practices that match family needs and schedules without criticizing and expecting that everyone will act the same."

Schools need to understand families in their communities. That means talking to them one-on-one, learning what they want and need from a school. "If you know your families, their basic obligations, their requirements, their aspirations and goals for their children, you'll be able to fine tune your practices for them," she said.

Paying attention to the calendar and the TV listings doesn't hurt either, she said.

Send your questions to Dr. Developer, 1128 Nottingham Rd., Grosse Pointe Park, Mich. 48230.

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