

Certain parental help works

By **Carla Thomas McClure**

State and federal policies promoting increased parent involvement are based on decades of research suggesting a positive link between parent involvement and students' academic success. But what kind of involvement? Findings from a recent study in Illinois suggest that schools serving low-income, at-risk populations might want to focus on supports for effective parenting and at-home learning.

What was the purpose of the study?

Researchers Melissa Ingram, Randi B. Wolfe, and Joyce M. Lieberman set out to identify and analyze the methods and extent of parent involvement in effective schools serving high numbers of minority and/or impoverished students. The researchers reasoned that such information could be valuable to similar schools wishing to fine-tune their parent involvement efforts in ways that support student achievement.

Haven't other studies examined the link between parent involvement and academic achievement? Yes — and almost all of them support the idea that parent involvement is good for students. In 1987, researcher Joyce Epstein identified six typologies of parent involvement: parenting, communicating, volunteering, learning at home, decision making, and collaborating with the community. In 2002, when Anne Henderson and Karen Mapp did a comprehensive review of the parent involvement research, they made an interesting discovery: Some forms of parent involvement, such as volunteering and attending school events, didn't seem to have much impact on student achievement. But at-home support for children's learning was associated with higher attendance, better student attitudes, and higher



achievement. A similar pattern revealed itself in the Chicago study.

How was the study done?

The research team surveyed parents at three high-achieving, at-risk public elementary schools to find out how much and what kind of involvement they had in their child's education. High-achieving schools were identified as those scoring in the top third of the state on the Illinois Standards Achievement Test. A school was identified as at risk if more than half of its students were minority students and more than half came from low-income families.

Researchers sent surveys (some in Spanish)

Volunteering and attending school events didn't seem to have much impact on student achievement in at-risk populations. What did was support at home for children's learning.

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to about 800 families whose children attended the schools selected for the study. The instrument used was the 42-item Family Involvement Questionnaire. Parents were asked to say how often (rarely, sometimes, often, or always) they participated in various home-based, school-based, and home-school conferencing activities. Researchers received 220 completed surveys and analyzed the responses.

What did the survey results reveal?

Parents who responded to the survey indicated that they rarely participated in parent involvement activities that involved communicating, volunteering, decision making, and collaborating with the community. The most common parent involvement practices among survey respondents involved activities associated with parenting and helping children learn at home. The parenting activities that most respondents said they engaged in “often” or “always” were maintaining rules and a schedule, sharing stories, and praising the child for schoolwork. Parents were somewhat less consistent about limiting their child’s television/video time. In the category of helping children learn at home, parents said they often or always spent time working on creative activities and reading, writing, and math skills. Fewer parents said they regularly took their child to the library or to zoos and museums. And some seemed hesitant about speaking with a teacher about homework expectations.

Did the researchers offer any recommendations?

Yes. They suggest that schools serving low-income, at-risk populations should focus their parent involvement efforts on those associated with improved academic achievement and provide related training for parents and teachers. Suggested topics for parent trainings include parenting skills, child development (to help them understand the impact of parenting decisions on their child’s development), and ways to support learning at home. Trainings for school faculty and staff should address how to work with parents, especially those who do not speak English very well or, for other reasons, may not feel comfortable in the school environment. Schools can also “act as a liaison to community resources

BENEFITS AND BARRIERS

In the past 30 years, researchers have identified benefits of and barriers to parents’ involvement in their child’s learning.

Benefits

- Higher grades and test scores
- Better attendance and higher graduation rates
- Increased motivation and self-esteem
- Lower rates of suspension
- Decreased use of drugs and alcohol
- Fewer instances of violent behavior
- Greater rates of enrollment in postsecondary education

Barriers

- Parents’ lack of knowledge about how to help with schoolwork or support learning at home
- Parents’ negative attitudes about school
- Lack of time and money
- Differences in language and culture
- Lack of teacher training in parent involvement
- Teachers’ negative attitudes and inaccurate assumptions about parents

Source: Ingram, Wolfe, & Lieberman, 2007.

such as libraries, museums, zoos, and theaters so that parents can help children learn outside of school settings.”

What else should I know about this study? The survey response rate was low, which limits the conclusions that can be drawn about parent involvement in high-performing, at-risk schools. In addition, this study was not designed to examine cause-and-effect relationships. The research team does, however, provide useful information for schools wishing to increase their support for the two types of parent involvement most closely linked to student achievement — effective parenting and at-home support for learning. ♦

References

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