

# THE LEARNING System

EVERY EDUCATOR ENGAGES IN EFFECTIVE PROFESSIONAL LEARNING EVERY DAY SO EVERY STUDENT ACHIEVES

## Inside

- What educators may be thinking during professional learning, p. 2
- Study explores what coaches need, p. 3
- Jumping hurdles, p. 6
- 6 types of family and community involvement, p. 7

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## National network redefines family involvement

By Anthony Armstrong

Ellen Ochoa Middle School's hallways and classrooms were filled with students eagerly competing against family members in games of skill, but not the typical beanbag and bowling ball games usually seen at family events. Instead, these games included factoring, probabilities, and geometric shapes. This was Math Family Night at Ellen Ochoa, one of several schools in the Pasco (Wash.) School District that earned an award for its research-based program of school, family, and community partnerships. Math Family Night is just one of many components of Ellen Ochoa's family and community involvement program. "It is one thing for students to go to math class because they are required," said one unidentified teacher, "but quite another thing for students to choose to come to Math Family Night and bring their families. There were so many parents that some activities ran out of supplies."

Research has linked increases in family involvement to improved student attendance, behavior, and learning; effective family involvement helps increase students' math, reading, and science achievement, and other outcomes regardless of family background measures (Epstein, et al., 2009; Sheldon, 2009). Not surprisingly, many educators are aware of the benefits of family involvement and rate it as a top priority. The 2009 *MetLife survey of the American teacher: Collaborating*

*for student success* showed that a large majority of teachers (88%) and principals (89%) felt that strengthening ties among schools and parents was very important for improving student achievement (p. 37). Yet, as many schools can attest, effectively strengthening those ties between schools and families requires a lot more than clever themes and isolated activities.

"What we learned from our years of research about family involvement is that parents were ready to get involved with the schools, but schools weren't always ready to get involved with parents," explained Joyce Epstein, founder and director of the National Network of Partnership Schools (NNPS).

Based at Johns Hopkins University, NNPS connects schools, districts, and state departments with researchers and facilitators to help bridge the gap between research and practice in family and community involvement. NNPS collects annual data from each school and district in the network to ensure that they evaluate the quality and progress of their programs. NNPS also turns the results of data analyses into researched-based tools to help districts and schools improve partnership programs and practices from year to year.

In the early years of her research, Epstein found that

*Continued on p. 4*



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*Continued from p. 1*

despite good intentions in wanting to increase family involvement, schools often failed to effectively enable all families to participate in ways that contributed to student success (1995). She also found that affluent communities traditionally experienced a higher rate of family involvement than communities with lower economic status, unless specific programs were in place to engage economically-stressed families. The same research showed that parents in lower socioeconomic groups were often only contacted when their children had behavioral or academic problems, which did not contribute to the development of a positive school community focused on student learning.

**Learning Forward  
BELIEF**

Schools' most complex problems are best solved by educators collaborating and learning together.

The early findings persist to this day in many districts and schools, and the time is ripe for schools to strengthen family involvement programs. According to *The MetLife Survey of the American Teacher: Preparing Students for College and Careers* (MetLife, 2010), nearly three-quarters (74%) of parents say that graduating every student from high school ready for college and a career must be done as one of the highest priorities in education; however, 46% of middle and high school parents rate their child's school as poor or fair on providing information to parents about the requirements to get into college, including 63% of middle school parents.

Overcoming the many challenges and inequities in family involvement is the mission of NNPS. "Our goal is to understand what schools, districts, and state departments need to do to get parents involved," said Epstein. "In the past, there wasn't much professional development for parental involvement. Schools were just hoping someone would step up to volunteer to lead an activity. Now we actually train state leaders; district leaders; and teams of teachers, parents, and administrators how to work together to develop, evaluate, and sustain a program that reaches out to all parents."

**A TEAM-BASED MODEL**

The NNPS model, based on years of research by Epstein and others, relies heavily on a collaborative, team-based methodology. "The team approach is essential for partnership programs," said Epstein. "Many places just hire a parent liaison and that is all. Parent liaisons or parent coordinators can be a good idea, if they are members of a school-based team of parents, teachers, an administrator, and, often community members. School-based teams and district leaders who focus explicitly on partnerships help build mutual respect among partners, collaboration, and sustainable programs of partnerships."

To build and sustain healthy partnerships, NNPS re-

quires districts to identify a partnership facilitator to serve as a link between NNPS, the district, and the schools. This person is guided to serve as the resident expert who engages staff and faculty in professional learning on partnerships, guides data gathering, measures results, helps school teams share best practices, and collaborates with others in the network.

Each school within the district then creates an Action Team for Partnerships (ATP) with 6-12 members, including the school principal, teachers, parents, and others. "The ATP is there to organize plans and practices that reach out to all parents in ways that help their children do their best in school," said Epstein.

**ONGOING LEARNING FOR INVOLVEMENT**

Throughout the year, in addition to monitoring and evaluating involvement activities, district facilitators communicate with each school's partnership team monthly to see how they are doing, attend team meetings when invited, disseminate new information to increase capacity on partnerships, build community relationships, and support the ATPs from the district level with ongoing learning and guidance.

"We frequently offer cluster training and ask that all ATP members attend one of our introductory sessions," said Jessica Wallace, parent partnership and pre-K outreach coordinator for Pasco. "We give information to the team leaders, such as the basics of the teams, why family involvement is important, what the research indicates, and the NNPS model."

Other sessions conducted by Wallace and her district co-leader, Lorraine Landon, Parent Education Center coordinator for Pasco, include two-hour leadership meetings where ATP chairs districtwide collaborate and share ideas and information. Landon and Wallace also work with their ATP leaders to get information out to families and help the school-based teams reflectively evaluate their leadership skills, including communication, dialogue, and feedback processes.

Four times per year, Landon and Wallace convene ATP chairs to review due dates and research tools. These learning sessions often feature key components of the teams' one-year action plan to help them establish clear goals, meet deadlines, conduct the end-of-year evaluation survey, etc. "Using the NNPS model means that there are due dates and documents

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Explore *The MetLife Survey of the American Teacher: Preparing Students for College and Careers* and access more than 25 years worth of archived surveys at [www.metlife.com/teachersurvey](http://www.metlife.com/teachersurvey).

*Continued on p. 5*

*Continued from p. 4*

for the teams to complete. At the district level, we found it is easier to help the ATPs complete the forms, gather the numbers, and document the results,” said Wallace.

Epstein urges district leaders to devote enough time for the professional learning necessary to help school teams continuously improve their partnership programs. “Professional development can include ongoing technical assistance, new training for teams that are scaling up to improve outreach to more diverse families, and learning how to facilitate teams and meetings,” said Epstein.

### DISTRICT SUPPORT IS KEY

District leader support is a critical component of successful family involvement programs in all schools in a district rather than one or two, said Epstein. Research indicates that district support can make significant improvements in involvement programs that outpace programs with little district support (Epstein, Galindo, & Sheldon, 2011).

The district leader’s role is key to sustainability, said Epstein. “District leaders need to show that partnership programs in all schools are part of the district’s policy and culture. Even if district leaders change, policies and people who guide schools on partnerships can ensure that family and community involvement programs continue in every school.”

Research has shown that the strength of the school’s evaluation process directly correlates with the quality of family and community involvement (Epstein et al., 2009). Landon and Wallace see the direct link between careful analysis and continuous improvement. “We review each idea, evaluate it, and look for ways to help the school improve it,” said Landon. “For example, one thing we learned was that families cannot always come to evening events because many parents work at night or find it easier to go into work a half hour late in the morning. So some of our schools now have events before school, such as classroom reading activities or math games with dads, doughnuts, and coffee.”

### FAMILY INVOLVEMENT FOR THE 21ST CENTURY

Ultimately, the biggest challenge districts face in improving involvement is reframing how people think about partnerships. “Historically, ‘parental involvement’ meant whatever parents did on their own. The focus was on the parents,” explained Epstein. “Now, when we say ‘school, family, and community partnership programs,’ we are moving the focus to the different roles that all partners play in helping students succeed in school. When school teams, community members, and district and state leaders plan and implement partnership programs to engage all parents, they will be more successful in reaching important goals with students than if they just hope or wish that parents would get involved.”

### 8 ESSENTIAL ELEMENTS OF EFFECTIVE SCHOOL, FAMILY, AND COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIPS

Family involvement programs with these components experienced higher quality, greater outreach, and more family members involved from one year to the next:

1. Leadership
2. Teamwork
3. Action plans
4. Implementation of plans
5. Funding
6. Collegial support
7. Evaluation
8. Networking

Source: Epstein et al., 2009.

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