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Research-based practices forge strong family and community partnerships

By Valerie von Frank

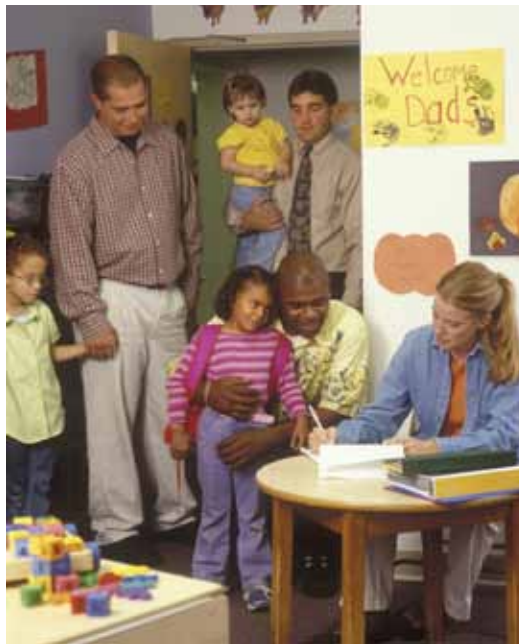
When schools have effective partnerships with families and the community, both students and teachers benefit.

Research increasingly is finding that strong partnerships benefit students. Key findings include:

- Students whose families are involved in their learning earn better grades, enroll in higher-level programs, have higher graduation rates, and are more likely to enroll in postsecondary education.
- When families take an active interest in what students

are learning, students display more positive attitudes toward school and behave better both in and out of school (Henderson, Mapp, Johnson, & Davies, 2007, p. 2).

Now, the *MetLife Survey of the American Teacher: Teachers, Parents and the Economy* (2011) finds that effective partnerships contribute to greater teacher job satisfaction and teachers who are



more optimistic about children's future success. In addition, parents in schools that work actively to engage them in partnership are more optimistic about their children's futures and view other parents and school staff as valuable resources, including parents in urban areas or those who have less formal education (MetLife, 2011, p. 54).

"It's unusual to see something as dramatic as this (MetLife) finding," said Joyce Epstein, director of the Center on School, Family, and Community Partnerships and the National Network of Partnership Schools at Johns Hopkins University and a leading expert on school, family, and community partnerships.

Epstein said the importance of family, school, and community partnerships is sometimes overlooked as schools home in on academic programs, not recognizing that strong partnerships can help improve student achievement. The key, she said, is using partnership practices that tie to school improvement goals and basing programs on what research

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EPSTEIN'S FRAMEWORK OF 6 TYPES OF INVOLVEMENT

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

- Provide information to all families who want or need it, not just to the few who can attend workshops or meetings at the school.
- Enable families to share information with schools about culture, background, children's talents, and needs.

2. Communicating: Design effective forms of school-to-home and home-to-school communications about school programs.

- Consider parents who do not speak English well, do not read well, or need large type.
- Establish clear two-way channels for communications from home to school and from school to home.

3. Volunteering: Recruit and organize parent help and support.

- Recruit volunteers widely so that all families know that their time and talents are welcome.
- Make flexible schedules for volunteers, assemblies, and events to enable parents who work to participate.

4. Learning at home: Provide information and ideas to families about how to help students at home.

- Design and organize a regular schedule of interactive homework (weekly or bimonthly) that gives students responsibility for discussing important things they are learning with their families.
- Coordinate family-linked homework activities, if students have several teachers.

5. Decision making: Include parents in school decisions, developing parent leaders and representatives.

- Include parent leaders from all racial, ethnic, socioeconomic, and other groups in the school.
- Offer training to enable leaders to serve as representatives of other families, with input from and return of information to all parents.

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

- Solve turf problems of responsibilities, funds, staff, and locations for collaborative activities.
- Assure equity of opportunities for students and families to participate in community programs or to obtain services.

Source: www.csos.jhu.edu/p2000/sixtypes.htm.

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has shown to be effective. Epstein's network publishes annual compilations of best practices in the series *Promising Partnership Practices* that show what schools and districts are doing to forge stronger community ties.

"It really becomes about bringing research-based practice to the fore," Epstein continued, "so that teachers at all levels will understand the new directions that are out there and can replace the old ways of thinking about family involvement with the structures and processes that will actually let them proceed in ways that focus on students' success — and by that we mean goal-linked partnership practices."

Educators must focus on engaging partners in ways that use their work and time to help students do their best academically or behaviorally, Epstein said. Educators developing effective partnerships must begin by learning to plan goal-linked activities that are tied to student learning. Schools that join Epstein's network form school-based action teams comprising teachers, parents, the principal, community partners, and others. Leaders train these team members, who then determine whether they want to create

their one-year action plan based on school improvement goals, or focus instead on the six types of family involvement (see sidebar above). Teams also assess the quality of their partnership programs and results.

"Otherwise, it's just fluff," Epstein said. "And these days, with the budget crises and economic distress, we can't be wasting people's time with feel-good activities."

Having a well-planned program enables educators to evaluate their work, she said.

"That has been a true missing link forever," Epstein said, "the idea that you can look at the structure of how this work is planned and implemented to evaluate progress and then change and improve in the next school year."

EIGHT ELEMENTS MAKE EFFECTIVE PARTNERSHIPS

Epstein says effective partnerships have eight common elements, basing her conclusion on extensive data from validated evaluation surveys of network schools over time (Epstein & Ganss, 2012).

"Programs that have these things in place do better in outreach to challenging families, families who don't speak

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English, moms who work, and all of those challenging groups we know schools face,” Epstein said.

Leadership. “If principals don’t want to go a new direction, it isn’t going to happen,” Epstein said. Commitment to family partnerships also must come at the district level. According to Epstein’s data, district leaders conducted an average of 10.5 of district-level activities listed in the survey, including conducting workshops for parents, reviewing budgets for partnerships, disseminating best practices across schools, reviewing the district’s policy on parent involvement, connecting with other colleagues about family and community partnerships, and posting information about the partnerships on the district website. District-level leaders can help schools write action plans, understand the framework of six types of involvement (see sidebar), meet with principals to discuss partnerships, and help organize committees to distribute leadership.

Teamwork. Successful programs have shared leadership that involves teachers, parents, and administrators, Epstein said. They must work together to create a plan for the year linked to the school improvement plan so that what families and community partners engage with has meaning for student success, she said.

Written plans. Schools and districts that showed effectiveness write an action plan for partnerships that is included in an appendix of the school improvement plan so that families’ actions are linked to teachers’ goals and students have multiple supports to achieve academically, Epstein said.

Implementation. In any area — reading, math, or family/community involvement — implementation is critical.

LEVELS OF SUPPORT IN PARENT ENGAGEMENT DIFFER

Teachers in schools with more than two-thirds minority students are less likely than those in schools with one-third or fewer minority students to rate the following people as excellent or good in preparing and supporting them to engage parents effectively: other teachers (80% vs. 91%), the principal (75% vs. 82%) and parents (51% vs. 69%).

When it comes to rating parents as excellent or good in preparing and supporting teachers to engage parents effectively, elementary school teachers are most likely to rate parents as excellent or good (69%), followed by fewer middle school teachers (60%) and even fewer high school teachers (55%).

Source: MetLife, 2011, p. 37.

“You can have a plan, but if it doesn’t get implemented, it’s just sitting on a shelf,” Epstein said.

Evaluation. “Evaluation means not just doing an exit evaluation of whether parents liked a family night, which those who attend tend to do, but to assess the quality of the school-based program and how the teamwork is working,” Epstein said. These elements are measured in the NNPS Update survey, she said.

Collegial support. Colleagues include those in the school, district, and community, both families and businesses, Epstein said.

Adequate budget. Budget is measured by per pupil expenditure so the cost of the program and funding sources are more specific, Epstein said. An adequate budget, rather than a target dollar amount, is key, she said. She called partnership programs “thrifty.” “Even for schools facing challenging financial situations, there is money to do this and to do it right,” Epstein said. “This program is about \$30 per pupil per year to do this right. . . . to have district and school level leadership that works, that reaches out to all families, improves from year to year, that understands this is part of school improvement work.”

Networking. “Those within our network who take advantage of sharing best practices, communicating with facilitators and asking questions, or using tools and measures do better from year to year,” Epstein said.

“It’s not a secret anymore what needs to be done to do this work,” Epstein said. “What’s surprising is that it’s still difficult to get the message across that this is a component of school organization, just as a good reading program is a component of good school organization.”

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