

# Parent and Community Engagement: Has Its Time Finally Come?

Recent decades have been frustrating ones for **education** reformers who have long urged greater family and **community engagement** in public **education**. Research increasingly shows its importance, and educators give it ever wider lip service. Yet, too often it remains only lip service, and public schools fail to make the changes needed for really effective collaboration between home, school, and **community**.

Even when school systems finally do put family and **community engagement** on the agenda, they tend to see it as an "extra" rather than an essential system change. Too often, the result is that school authorities -- and even **community** leaders -- conclude: "The parents we need to reach aren't interested," or "People only want to complain and criticize, not help." So efforts to shift to a collaborative approach remain a low priority at best.

But the situation is changing. Not only is there more research supporting the importance of family and **community** involvement for student success, but several highly visible pilot projects in major cities, such as the Harlem Children's Zone in New York and the Children's Aid Society's **community**-based programs, demonstrate that serious family **engagement** and the mobilization of out-of-school resources are possible, even in difficult urban situations.

The question is how to implement this student-family-**community** model, given that these days schools are so distracted by a narrowly conceived "hard-nosed accountability" that is driving them into increased top-down bureaucratic control instead of collaboration, and almost insane low-skills test prep instead of high-quality learning.

Educators are right to complain about this misconceived type of accountability, and they have a point that low achievement is affected by out-of-school factors such as poverty, poor parenting, and health problems.

However, the positive side to this new pressure for achievement is that more policymakers now realize that many of our failing students simply are not getting the supports they need for success, and that something has to be done.

This puts us at the cusp of a crucial change in our basic attitude toward **education** that will make all the difference in our success: a shift from the current common assumption that **education** is a responsibility delegated to schools alone (the way fire-fighting, policing, and defense have been delegated to specialized agencies) to the concept that **education** must be accepted as a shared responsibility of home, school, and **community**.

Many -- not all -- parents and teachers already instinctively know this. But our institutional relationships for more than a century have moved in the opposite direction, toward bureaucratic schooling that de-emphasizes responsible roles for students, parents, and communities. Changing

basic attitudes and assumptions is difficult, since they are often unconscious and invisible. But this particular change is one I believe our society is ready to make. Actually, it is common sense in many ways -- an idea that only needs to be brought into the open to be widely accepted. And shifting to this mind-set will reduce the unfairness of holding schools solely responsible for children's successful **education**, which should make it easier for almost any teacher or fair-minded parent to accept.

Although common sense can be impeded by deeply entrenched relationships and mental habits, I believe we are finally at the edge of realizing that, without a much more powerful and successful approach to **education**, our society will fail its future, and that ultimately **education** will advance only if we accept it as a shared responsibility and stop expecting schools alone to "deliver" it for us.

Joyce Epstein's Center on School, Family, and **Community** Partnerships at Johns Hopkins University has been working on this issue for many years. The center has demonstrated not only that this approach can greatly increase student success, but also that the time, training, and **community** development needed to implement the approach are less costly than most other reforms and have a far greater multiplier effect in increasing student success. What's most needed now is the leadership in schools and **communities** to help people make this shift and implement these new collaborative relationships.

**Education** Week recently ran a back-page Commentary with the headline: "Volunteers Are Ready -- All Schools Need to Do Is Ask." It told a heartwarming story of successful volunteer recruitment at one of Indianapolis' lowest-performing schools; the outcome was impressive results for poor and minority students.

Even so, most school systems are not asking for the help that they and their students need and that may be available. Too often, school leaders have not yet recognized the enormous potential of beginning to work together in what is essentially a new kind of partnership.

This could be the most important mobilization for America in the 21st century: **communities** all over America, working intensively together to ensure the success of all their children to the levels of learning and citizenship needed for today's world, but unattainable by the schools alone.

Without such a mobilization, America's educational reform efforts will never succeed at the levels this country needs. And, if we fail, a very large shadow will continue to hang over our nation's future.

DAVID S. SEELEY, a City University of New York professor emeritus, was assistant U.S. commissioner of **education** for equal educational opportunities under President Lyndon B. Johnson. He is the author of **Education** Through Partnership (Ballinger, 1981), which spells out the need for redesigning public **education** as a shared responsibility of home, school, and **community**.

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By David S. Seeley, City University of New York professor emeritus