

School, Family, and Community Partnerships Link the Plan

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From *Principal*

STUDENTS who succeed in school are almost always supported by their families, while other students struggle without support from home. For a school to develop a partnership program involving all parents in ways that increase student success requires new ways of thinking about family and community involvement. All schools need a purposeful, planned partnership program creating a welcoming envi-

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ronment and engaging families in activities that contribute to students' readiness for school, academic success, and positive attitudes and behaviors.

New approaches are needed because research shows that most parents not presently involved would like to be, if their children's teachers, administrators, and counselors showed them how to help their children increase reading and math scores, improve attendance, and meet other important goals. Although many parents work outside the home during the school day, or face other time constraints, they want to know what they can do in their limited family time to help their children succeed in school.

In the past 10 years, research-based approaches have been developed to help educators and parents work together, as partners, in planned, goal-linked activities that support all students' teaming and success.

A New Direction Based on Research

The new direction is to conduct a *program* of school, family, and community partnerships linked to the school improvement plan. This approach, developed with educators in the National Network of Partnership Schools at Johns Hopkins University, recognizes that students learn and grow at home, at school, and in their communities, and that they are influenced and assisted by their families, teachers, principals, and others in the community.

Research shows that partnership programs require teamwork. All stakeholders have active roles in developing productive partnerships and in improving and sustaining their work over time. This is best accomplished by forming an action team for partnerships (ATP), consisting of teachers, parents, the principal, other educators, and community partners.

As the "action arm" of a school council, the ATP is responsible for preparing annual action plans, organizing committees, implementing and coordinating activities, monitoring progress, evaluating results, publicizing activities, and reporting regularly to the school council, faculty, parent organizations, and other school and community groups. The team also gathers input and ideas from all stakeholders in seeking to continually improve family and community involvement.

Each year, the ATP writes an action plan for partnerships that identifies and schedules activities for family and community involvement linked to four major school improvement goals. Two are academic goals (e.g., improving students' skills in reading, math, science, etc.); the third is a nonacademic goal (e.g., improving student attendance, behav-

ior, respect for other students, or planning for college). The fourth goal is to help educators create a welcoming partnership climate for students, families, and educators.

The action plan includes several involvement activities for each of the major goals. For example, if the goal is to improve students' reading skills, the ATP and teachers might conduct workshops to help parents read aloud to very young children, organize reading-buddy volunteers to work with older students, or design reading homework that calls for students to discuss books with a family partner.

Six Types of Involvement

Many studies have produced a framework of six types of involvement that can help establish and strengthen a comprehensive program of school, family, and community partnerships:

Parenting. Assist families with parenting skills, family support, understanding child and adolescent development, and setting home conditions to support learning at each age and grade level. Assist schools in understanding families' backgrounds, cultures, and goals for children.

Communicating. Communicate with families about school programs and student progress in varied, clear, and productive ways. Create two-way communication channels from school to home and from home to school, so that families can easily keep in touch with teachers, administrators, counselors, and other families.

Volunteering. Improve recruitment, training, activities, and schedules to involve families as volunteers and audiences. Enable educators to work with regular and occasional volunteers who assist and support students and the school.

Learning at home. Involve families with their children in academic learning activities at home, including homework, goal-setting, and other curriculum-related activities. Encourage teachers to design homework that enables students to share and discuss interesting work and ideas with family members.

Decision making. Include families as participants in school decisions, governance, and advocacy activities through school councils or improvement teams, committees, PTA/PTO, and other parent organizations. Assist family and teacher representatives in obtaining information from and giving information to those they represent.

Collaborating with the community. Coordinate resources and services for families, students, and the school with community businesses, agencies, cultural and civic organizations, colleges or universities, and other community groups. Enable students, staff, and families to contribute their service to the community.

Comprehensive partnership programs should include activities for

all six types of involvement, including workshops for parents, newsletters, parent-teacher-student conferences, volunteers, and interactive homework, to name just a few. Each activity raises explicit challenges that must be met in order to involve all families and to create two-way connections for educators and parents to share information and support students. Each school's program differs from the next, as plans are customized to meet specific goals and to serve the needs and interests of families in each community.

Better School Partnership Programs

As school leaders, principals have unique responsibilities to support family and community involvement for student success. In our work with hundreds of schools across the country, we have seen principals enhance the quality of their schools' partnership programs by taking some of the following actions:

- Use the bully pulpit of the principal's office to let teachers, staff, parents, and the community know that yours is a partnership school, and that the administration, staff, and action team will work with them to help all students succeed to their fullest potential.

- Let *all* students know—frequently—how important their families are to the school and to the students' progress and success.

- Allocate or budget funds for planned activities of school, family, and community partnerships.

- At the year's first faculty meeting, talk about the ATP's mission, the importance of partnership teamwork, and the support that will be provided.

- Recognize teachers' contributions to the school's program of partnerships in activities they conduct with their students' families. Help teachers become more effective in communicating with parents about students' homework, schoolwork, grades, and test scores, and in conducting parent-teacher-student conferences.

- Publicize scheduled involvement activities throughout the school year. Encourage participation by teachers, parents, and others to develop a strong partnership program, a welcoming school climate, and sense of community.

- Guide the ATP in making periodic reports on partnership plans and accomplishments to the school council, faculty, parent organization, local media, and key community groups.

- Work with community groups and leaders to locate resources that will enrich the curriculum.

- Recognize and thank ATP leaders and team members, active family volunteers, business and community partners, and others for their time and contributions to involvement activities.

● Work with district administrators and principals from other schools to arrange professional development, share ideas, solve challenges, and improve school, family, and community partnerships.

Many studies confirm that when schools develop excellent programs of partnership, even hard-to-reach families become involved in their children's education. For example, if schools actively welcome and train volunteers, more parents and others will volunteer to help at school, at home, and in the community. And if teachers assign weekly interactive homework in particular subjects, more students and families will discuss students' work and ideas at home.


When schools have well-developed partnership programs, families become involved and students become more positive about school and learning. Studies have found improvement in students' attendance, behavior, homework completion, and report card grades.

Don't Let Parents Figure It Out Alone

New evidence of the effectiveness of well-developed programs of school, family, and community partnerships for student success means that educators can no longer afford to let parents figure out how they can be involved in their children's education. Educators, parents, and the community must work together to plan and implement a comprehensive program of involvement to create a welcoming school environment and help students succeed. Indeed, the "No Child Left Behind" Act requires schools to have well-planned programs of family and community involvement to support student achievement, and to communicate clearly with parents.

Schools striving to involve families in their children's education can improve results by taking a team approach to organize the partnership program, reaching out to more families, and linking involvement activities to student achievement goals. Help is available for principals to develop and sustain research-based programs of partnership.

In the National Network of Partnership Schools at Johns Hopkins University (www.partnershipschools.org), educators, parents, and researchers work together to learn how to continually improve partnership programs and results for students. In this way, research is helping improve practice, and practice is helping improve research. A school ready to strengthen its partnership program can join other schools in advancing family and community involvement that will increase students' skills, scores, and success in school.

Principals are key to whether these new approaches to partnership succeed. Only with their leadership and ongoing support will teachers, students, parents, community members, and others work closely together for the benefit of schools and the children they serve. 

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