

Overcoming barriers to family involvement in low-income area schools

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Thirty years of research supports the conclusion that family involvement in children's education is critical to student achievement (U.S. Department of Education, 1994). Increasing families' involvement in the education of their children so that all children can achieve at high levels is an important goal of Title I of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, as amended by the Improving America's Schools Act (IASA) of 1994. Title I provides over 7 billion dollars each year to schools to assist children from low-income families. The goal of Title I is to improve the teaching and learning of children in high-poverty schools so they can meet challenging academic content and performance standards.

All schools and districts receiving Title I funds must engage in an extensive array of activities to build the capacity of both parents and school staff to work together in support of students' learning. Title I also requires schools to develop, with parents, a written parent involvement policy that describes how schools will keep parents adequately informed and how they will involve parents in the planning, review, and improvement of Title I programs.

The IASA law required that the U.S. Department of Education (ED) conduct a study of parent involvement that identifies and describes:

- 'common barriers to effective parental involvement in the education of participating children;' and
- 'successful local policies and programs that improve parental involvement and the performance of participating children.'

A summary of the Report to Congress on the study follows below.

Data sources for ED's study included: (1) a review of the research literature on parent involvement; (2) the Fast Response Survey of School and Family Partnerships in Public Schools, K-8 (SFSP), a nationally representative survey of 810 elementary and middle school principals; (3) the Parent/Family Involvement component of the National Household Education Survey (NHES), a nationally representative survey of 20,792 children and their parents; (4) profiles of 20 local Title I programs that have been successful in overcoming barriers to parent involvement; and (5) parent focus group interviews conducted at five of those programs. Most data were collected in 1996. The measure of poverty is the count of students receiving free or reduced-price lunches at school.

Barriers to family involvement in their children's education

A large body of research has documented that when schools make a concerted effort to enlist parents' help in fostering children's learning, student achievement rises (Armor, 1976; Epstein, 1991; Leler, 1983; Toomey, 1986). When schools invest in developing partnerships with families that enable parents to support their children's learning at home and in school, the potential benefits for students are great. When school-related, family-related, or community-related barriers deter parents from becoming involved, students lose an important source of support for their academic learning. The report identifies five major kinds of barriers.

1. Lack of Time and Other Resources

Both schools and families frequently lack the time and other resources they need to establish effective partnerships.

- Principals of K-8 Title I schools report that time is a barrier to parent involvement more often than any other factor. 87% of Title I principals report that lack of time on the part of parents is a significant barrier to parent involvement, and 56% report that lack of time on the part of school staff is a barrier.
- Teachers and parents lack the logistical support that would facilitate their work together.
- Time and resource constraints are especially problematic for poor parents. For these parents, basic survival, child care, and health needs often interfere with their participation in school events (Fruchter, Galletta, & White, 1992; Lontos, 1991).

2. Lack of Information and Training

- Most parents and school staff receive little training on how to work with one another.
- Almost half of principals (48%) in K-8 Title I schools report that lack of staff training in working with parents is a great or moderate barrier to parent involvement.
- Some parents report that they do not know how to assist their children's academic learning.

Without the proper information and the skills to work together, school staff and families are more likely to view each other with suspicion and distrust:

- 20% of principals in K-8 Title I schools report that staff attitudes about parents are a barrier to parent involvement in school. Uninformed teachers are more likely to view parents' absence in school as an indication that parents don't care about the education of their children.
- Parents who experience schools as uninviting or alienating may decide that teachers do not really care for them or their children.

3. School Organization and Practices

Traditional school organization and practices, especially in secondary schools, often discourage family members from becoming involved.

- Survey data show that parents of older children are less likely to attend a school event or volunteer at their child's school than parents of younger children.
- Because secondary schools are generally much larger than elementary schools, with each teacher responsible for many more students, they can seem impersonal to parents.

Some schools continue to rely exclusively on traditional outreach methods that have proven effective for only a limited number of families.

- Many school activities that involve parents, such as open houses and student performances, tend to be school-dominated and peripheral to the day-to-day operations of the school.
- If schools do invest in developing a repertoire of parent involvement activities that emphasize personalized attention and interaction with parents, they will be more successful in engaging parents whom they had given up as 'hard to reach.'

4. Family-School Differences

Differences in education level, language, and cultural styles between parents and school staff sometimes make it more difficult for them to form effective partnerships.

- Parents who have little education themselves participate less often in school-related parent involvement activities, such as volunteering in their child's classroom or attending parent-teacher conferences. Parents who have had negative experiences themselves as students may avoid contact with their children's schools as a result. In fact, survey data show that parents' educational level is even more strongly associated with their involvement in schools than is household income level.

- Survey data show that parents who do not speak English at home are less likely to participate in school-based activities, and more likely to participate in fewer activities over the course of the school year.
- Culturally based differences in communication styles, expectations for teachers, parents, and children, and views on the best ways to raise and educate children can create discontinuities between families and schools (McCollum & Russo, 1993; Kellaghan, Sloane, Alvarez, & Bloom, 1993).

5. Lack of External Support for Family-School Partnerships

Family-school partnerships are difficult to nurture without the support of state and district policymakers, community organizations, and employers.

- The absence of clearly defined and articulated policy on family involvement from the state or district level and a lack of resources to support professional development related to family involvement sends a powerful message to schools.
- Many neighborhoods lack easy access to resources that can support parents' efforts to help their children learn. Such resources include libraries, museums, recreation facilities, and health and social services.
- Many employers compound the pressures on parents with inflexible work schedules.

Survey data suggest that many of the barriers described in this report have significant, measurable effects on parent involvement in schools, especially among low-income parents, parents with little education, and parents of older children. Schools, under the leadership of principals, possess the primary responsibility for initiating family-school partnerships; the experience of hundreds of schools across the country demonstrates that it can be done.

Successful local approaches to promoting family involvement in their children's education

Many successful strategies used by Title I schools and districts across the country demonstrate the capacity of families, schools, and communities, working together, to influence children's learning in positive ways. The experiences of 20 schools and districts that have been successful in engaging parents in their children's education illustrate many effective strategies for moving schools, families, and communities beyond the common barriers to family involvement.

Examples from these schools and districts will be provided.

Overcoming Time and Resource Constraints

- *Schools can set aside time during the school day for teachers to meet with parents at school or at home or free teachers from routine chores, such as lunchroom supervision, so that they can work with parents.*
- *Some schools can also use technology to support school-home communication.* This kind of logistical support includes easier access to telephones for teachers, voice mail, and 'homework hotlines.'
- *To help parents overcome time and resource constraints, schools can provide transportation and child care services, schedule events at convenient times, and conduct home visits.*
- *In addition to finding ways to help parents become involved at school, schools can help parents support their children's learning at home.* In their daily interactions with their children at home, parents can be powerful resources for promoting their children's academic success.

Providing Information and Training to Parents and School Staff

- *Training in basic parenting skills teaches parents about child development and how to*

- establish a home environment that supports student learning.*
- *Courses that help parents build their own basic literacy skills, earn a high school equivalency diploma, accumulate college credit, or develop job-related skills also support parents' involvement in their children's education.* By helping parents to reach their own academic and vocational goals, schools equip them to better support their children's learning.
 - *Workshops help parents support their children's learning at home by offering practical ideas on ways that parents can work with their children directly on school work.* Common topics include helping students with curriculum-related activities, homework, other academic decisions and planning, and preparing for required tests.
 - *Some training prepares parents to contribute effectively to school decision-making or to work as volunteers.*
 - *Training for school staff is essential for supporting the development of effective school-family partnerships.* Such training addresses telephone calls, home visits, and other contact strategies; communication skills for parent-teacher conferences; and involving parents as leaders and decision-makers in the schools.
 - *Engaging parent coordinators or volunteers to train school staff not only builds parents' leadership skills but also offers teachers the opportunity to learn first-hand about parents' perspectives.*

Restructuring Schools to Support Family Involvement

Some schools highlighted in this report have reorganized to promote closer interaction between teachers and students and, by extension, between teachers and families. They have also redefined traditional parent events to create more meaningful ways to welcome and involve parents in school life.

- *An on-going needs assessment helps schools respond more effectively to parents' needs and*

interests. By asking parents about their interests, needs, and ideas for family involvement on an ongoing basis, schools help ensure that their efforts to reach out to parents complement parents' real needs and strengths.

- *Schools can make changes to their physical environment.* For example, they can create a space just for parents within the school, such as a parent resource center, and they can post a parent volunteer in the entrance hall to welcome parents.
- *Schools can also create formal organizational structures for parent participation.* Groups such as parent committees, volunteer committees, and site-based management councils allow parents to take an active role in decisions affecting the school and their children.

Whatever steps schools take to develop close partnerships with families on behalf of students' learning, schools that are most successful are prepared to reconsider all of their established ways of doing business and to restructure in ways that will make them less hierarchical, more personal, and more accessible to parents.

Bridging school-family differences

- *Schools can help parents strengthen their own basic literacy skills.* Some schools highlighted in this report offer GED, ESL, and other adult basic education classes to parents on site; other schools send home projects and activity kits intended to build parents' literacy skills as they work on them with their children.
- *'Family math' nights or similar events help allay parents' fears about their own mastery of subject matter.* These events give parents a chance to learn together with their children in an environment that is pleasant and non-threatening.
- *To address language barriers, schools highlighted in this report provide extensive translation services.* These schools provide translation for school-home communications,

parenting training, and participation in decision-making and school governance.

- *A home-school liaison, often a parent who lives in the community, can play a crucial role in building trust between home and school.*

Because a home-school liaison is usually closely identified with the community and shares the same cultural background with parents, he or she is well-equipped to reach out to parents whose cultural backgrounds differ from teachers'.

- *Other schools provide training and other activities to promote understanding of different cultures among school staff.*

Tapping external support for family-school partnerships

Among the schools highlighted here, successful parent involvement strategies often grow out of family resource centers and partnerships with local businesses, agencies, colleges, and universities.

- *School-community partnerships can support an array of services that help parents get more involved in their children's education.* Such services may include homework hotlines, social services such as substance abuse or child abuse prevention, conferences and workshops, adult education, health services, refurbished school facilities, and refreshments for and transportation to school-sponsored events.
- *School district and state supports for family involvement include policies, funding, training, and family services that support school-family partnerships.* District and state-run parent resource centers are one example of how schools can benefit.

Effects on student achievement

Although one cannot say that student achievement gains or other positive outcomes in any school or district are due solely to their parent involvement activities, it does appear that many schools that make parent involvement a

priority also see student outcomes improve in some way. For example, of the 13 schools highlighted in this report, eight report gains in student achievement data over the last one to three years and four report gains in attendance rates or consistently high attendance over 95%. Parents themselves believe that their involvement influences their child's performance in school. In focus group interviews, for example, many parents argued that their involvement had improved their children's attitude toward school and engagement in learning.

Early implementation of the Title I Parent Involvement Provisions

Survey data collected from Title I schools in spring 1996, less than a year after the new Title I provisions went into effect. They provide some preliminary information on the implementation of many activities required or endorsed by Title I. Because the data were collected early, the findings should be considered baseline measures of schools' progress in implementing Title I.

- *64% of Title I principals reported that their schools consult parents in the development of parent involvement activities.* This consultation is a key requirement of Title I.
- *78% of Title I principals reported that their schools have advisory groups or policy councils that include parents.*
- *A much smaller number of Title I schools reported, however, that they consider parent input when making decisions on selected topics related to school programs and policies.* For example, only 40% involve parents in making decisions about the allocation of funds, and only 49% involve parents in making decisions about discipline policies and procedures.

To build parents' capacity to support their children's learning, most Title schools take steps to provide parents with information on how to help their children learn at home, although the

quality, as well as the reach, of the information provided clearly varies across schools.

- *96% of Title I principals reported that their schools provide information to parents on at least one topic related to parenting or helping their children learn at home.* Topics include: (1) child or adolescent development; (2) nutrition, health, or safety; (3) parenting skills; (4) information on community services; (5) helping with homework; (6) developing study skills; and (7) ideas for learning activities outside of school.

Other services to parents endorsed in the Title I legislation are fairly common among Title I schools, although they are not universal.

- *Of the Title I schools that serve students whose parents have limited English skills, 86% reported that they provide interpreters for meetings.* 69% report that they provide translations of printed materials. These findings indicate a relatively widespread effort on the part of Title I schools to accommodate parents with limited English proficiency.

- *37% of Title I school principals reported that their schools have parent resource centers.*

- *67% of Title I principals reported that at least some of their staff make home visits.* Staff reach an average of 17% of families in one year.

Conclusion

Although evidence of the most common barriers to parent involvement can be found in almost any school, the experience of many schools and districts demonstrates that they can be overcome. Successful schools view children's success as a shared responsibility, and all stakeholders - including parents, administrators, teachers, and community leaders - play important roles in supporting children's learning.

Title I can be an important catalyst for the wider adoption of policies and practices that have

proven effective in fostering partnerships between schools and families. Title I requires or endorses many strategies that are recognized as effective in supporting parents' involvement in their children's education, and many of the practices highlighted in Title I - for example, parent resource centers, home visits, and the provision of information and training to parents - are already common among Title I schools.

It remains to be seen how well federal and state efforts to foster family-school partnerships will support the successful development of school-family partnerships in Title I schools. Continuing research will be needed to assess schools' implementation of the Title I parent involvement provisions as well as the quality of the assistance that schools receive from states and districts. A closer look at the strategies required or endorsed in federal and state policy - for example, school-parent compacts, information and training for parents and school staff, and special strategies such as home visits - as they are implemented in schools will provide policymakers, practitioners, and parents with a better understanding of how all schools can sustain effective partnerships with families.

In addition to its legal requirements, the U.S. Department of Education has sponsored a Partnership for Family Involvement in Education since 1994. It has grown to over 5000 schools and organizations. Through publications, conferences and information sharing, the Partnership aims to increase opportunities for families to be involved in their children's learning at school and at home, to strengthen schools, and to improve student achievement. In this way the federal government also provides information and assistance to help overcome barriers to family involvement in their children's education.