

Preparing teachers to work with parents

Diana B. Hiatt-Michael

Outstanding teachers, such as those selected for the Milken Teaching Award or those who achieve National Board for Professional Teaching Standards [NBPTS] certification, regularly communicate with the families of their students. These teachers appreciate the value of home-school communication because experience has shown that understanding and the family was the essential to effectively work with the student.

A review of research during the past two decades has supported that understanding (Epstein, 2001; Hiatt-Michael, 2001). Teachers' efforts to involve families promote the following: (a) better student attendance; (b) higher graduation rate from high school; (c) fewer retentions in the same grade; (d) increased levels of parent and student satisfaction with school; (e) more accurate diagnosis of students for educational placement in classes; (f) reduced number of negative behavior reports; and, (g) most notably, higher achievement scores on reading and math tests.

Based upon these findings, National Education Goals and Improving America's Schools Act [IASA] in 1994 brought the importance of parent involvement to the forefront in schools and school districts. The eighth goal in National Education Goals supports 'school partnerships that will increase parent involvement and participation in promoting the social, emotional, and academic growth of children' (U.S. Department of Education, 1994). IASA requires that districts that receive more than \$500,000 per year must allocate 1% of those funds for parent involvement activity.

However, the primary press for parent involvement in teacher education programs is coming from teachers entering the contemporary

classroom, many filled with students from cultures other than that of the new teacher. These new teachers report on standard follow-up evaluations from their university that one of the missing elements in their teacher education programs is working with families.

Standards or courses on family involvement issues

Until the past few years, most state teacher certification departments did not require that teacher education programs include standards or courses on family involvement issues. The Harvard Family Study Report (Shartrand, et al., 1997) concluded that only 22 states had parent involvement in their credentialing standards. California is the first and only state that has enacted legislation mandating prospective teachers and certified educators 'to serve as active partners with parents and guardians in the education of children' (California Education Code 44291.2, 1993). California enacted this legislation because parent involvement research indicates higher student achievement and satisfaction with schools *and* because professional educators and parents/guardians may be from diverse cultures. At present, the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards includes parent involvement as one out of the eleven generalist standards for all three developmental levels--Early Childhood, Middle Childhood and Early Adolescence.

Gray (2001) reported a significant increase during the late 1990s in the number of states that had some administrative or credential statement requiring that teachers should possess some knowledge and skills related to parent and community involvement. These state-

credentialing bodies added a parent and community involvement component into teacher education standards or adopted National Council for the Accreditation of Teacher Education [NCATE] standards that include such standards for working with parents and the community.

The extent of parent involvement issues

To determine the extent of parent involvement issues in K-12 teacher education programs in the nation, a recent representative survey of 147 universities with teacher education programs tapped department chairs or deans of private and public institutions in each of the fifty states (Hiatt-Michael, 2001). The survey raised questions on number of courses, types of courses, topics, and class instructional methods. Of the 96 who responded to the survey, 7 indicated that parent involvement issues were not included in any course. Twenty-two replied that the school offered a course devoted to parent involvement, but this course was not required for K-12 teacher education students. Such courses were developed for special education or early childhood teachers or offered as an elective course.

Ninety-three percent of the respondents reported that parent involvement issues were woven into existing teacher education courses, such as special education, reading methods, instructional methods, and early childhood education in that rank order. In states with major portions of the population coming from diverse cultures, parent involvement is included in cultural diversity and teaching English-as-a-second-language courses. Universities in Hawaii and California, locales with a high proportion of diverse ethnic groups, reported the greatest number of courses that included parent involvement issues.

Respondents replied that the most popular topic is parent conferences. This finding is important because parent conferences are the most pervasive home-school communication in schools after the ubiquitous report card. Other topics, in rank order, included parent concerns, parent newsletters, and working within the community.

Forty-nine percent of respondents reported that students utilized case studies in one or more courses. Other instructional methods were research studies (40%), role-playing (40%), conflict resolution (32%), project creation (24%), and home surveys (15%).

These research findings are similar to other studies reported by Epstein (2001). Epstein also indicated that early childhood and special education receive a disproportionate amount of parent involvement attention within university preparation and in school practice. In addition, the research suggested there is a limited percentage of programs that include other forms of home-school partnership such as utilizing interactive homework with parents, conducting parent workshops, designing and producing class or school newsletters, and planning a concerted, year-long program of partnerships. The research finds, however that although classroom teachers assert that working with families is important to the child's positive school outcomes, they receive little formal training and, thus, possess minimal knowledge and skills to work with parents. Teacher education courses that deal with parent involvement issues and practices do make a difference in subsequent classroom practice. An assessment study by Katz and Bauch (1999) on graduates from teacher education programs at Peabody College, Vanderbilt University indicated that these new teachers felt prepared and engaged in a diverse number of parent involvement practices because they had received parent involvement training in their courses.

Infusion of parent involvement practices within all teacher preparation courses appears to be the reported ideal, but not all professors are equally committed to parent involvement. Knowledge of subject matter areas, standards, and testing assume such priority by faculty, who note the emphasis by state and district administrators on those topics, that the potent component of the educational process--parent involvement--receives significantly less emphasis.

Work by Kirschenbaum and Hiatt-Michael summarize numerous promising practices for teachers related to infusing parent involvement into their university instruction (Hiatt-Michael, in press). Acquiring skills to promote positive home-school communication is one of the most critical. These authors recommend that university faculty as well as teacher supervisors, master teachers, and administrators utilize case studies and role-playing to familiarize teachers with the intricacies of a positive parent conference. Prospective and new teachers should visit master teachers in classrooms to observe and critique parent conferences. These authors suggest course and classroom activities: preparing a case study on a family, making a home visit, providing home-school literacy programs, preparing a classroom newsletter, attending and participating in a school advisory council, and many others.

According to those outstanding teachers honored by the Milken Foundation or meeting the generalist standards for the NBPTS, other activities should include how to effectively gather important information from parents, how to handle difficult situations, and how to connect with parents on the telephone and in person. If teachers do not receive training in teacher education programs prior to entering the classroom, opportunities to acquire such training within the school setting are limited. California created the Beginning Teacher Support Activities [BTSA] to support new teachers, especially those who were entering the field with an emergency credential. School districts that experience a teacher shortage may hire new teachers on an emergency credential that requires new teachers to possess only a bachelor's degree in any area and to pass the California Test of Basic Skills. The majority of these new teachers are not from the same ethnic population as the students and the community. Districts must apply to the state for BTSA funding. Ten to twenty percent of the BTSA program for new teachers includes teacher professional education to develop skills to work with families and the surrounding community.

The amount and types of activities vary with the teacher, school and district needs.

Three national hubs are the most promising sources for information, training and support to new teachers. These hubs are connecting schools, districts and states into networks of sharing, development, and assessment. These hubs are the clearinghouses for practices, research studies, and policy statements. Schools that connect with these hubs showcase promising practices for parent involvement. The Institute for Responsive Education at Boston University has researched and promoted parent involvement issues for nearly four decades. This group has connected educators in the area of family, school community partnerships across the nation and every continent. The National Network of Partnership Schools based at John Hopkins University coordinates a network of schools, districts and state agencies that adhere to the Epstein model of six types of parent involvement (Epstein, 2001). This group promotes staff development, the creation of site action plans, and assessment at each site. Administrators, teachers, and parents at each participating site collaborate on these activities. At the federal level, Partnership for Family Involvement in Education within the U.S.

Department of Education coordinates a diverse range of activities. The agency organizes staff development sessions, collects information on promising practices, and disseminates informative brochures.

Conclusion

Though the benefits of working with families are documented, teacher education programs and local school districts offer limited educational opportunities to new teachers. California enacted a law that appears to have more university support for parent involvement within teacher education courses than states with only administrative requirements or adoption of NCATE Standards. In addition, through the funding of BTSA California supports the training

of new teachers at the local site level. In other localities, federal funding promotes working with families but may not require teacher professional development. Legislation is needed that supports teacher education to meet necessary requirements

to work effectively with families across all 50 states. Legislation appears to be the next step to foster teacher professional development in the area of working with parents.

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