

Back to school: How parent involvement affects student achievement (At a glance)

It may be one of the least controversial statements in American education: Parent involvement can make a difference in a child's education. The conflict can come, though, on how to define that involvement. Do all the PTA meetings, take-home flyers and Back to School nights actually generate increases in student achievement? The Center for Public Education examined the research and found that creating a partnership between parents and schools focused on academics truly does have significant impact on student achievement.

The six types of parent involvement

Joyce Epstein of the Johns Hopkins University, Center on School, Family and Community Partnerships, one of the nation's leading experts on parent involvement, divided school parent involvement programs into six broad categories:

1. **Parenting**, in which schools help families with their parenting skills by providing information on children's developmental stages and offering advice on learning-friendly home environments;
2. **Communicating**, or working to educate families about their child's progress and school services and providing opportunities for parents to communicate with the school;
3. **Volunteering**, which ranges from offering opportunities for parents to visit their child's school to finding ways to recruit and train them to work in the school or classroom;
4. **Learning at home**, in which schools and educators share ideas to promote at-home learning through high expectations and strategies so parents can monitor and help with homework.
5. **Decision-making**, in which schools include families as partners in school organizations, advisory panels, and similar committees.
6. **Community collaboration**, a two-way outreach strategy in which community or business groups are involved in education and schools encourage family participation in the community.

Who is involved?

- National survey data from the National Center for Education Statistics shows that attending school meetings or events is the leading form of parent participation in schools, followed by school fundraising activities.
- The survey also found some distinct variations by race. K-8 parents of white students were more likely than parents of African American or Hispanic students to attend a school event, volunteer or serve on a school committee and participate in school fundraising. However, while 82 percent of parents of white students said an adult checked their child's homework, the rates were higher among parents of African American and Hispanic students, which reported rates of 94% and 91%, respectively.
- Other studies have shown that lower-income and minority parents often have the same level of involvement in education as others — even though it may not necessarily be reflected at PTA meetings or school fundraisers.

What kind of involvement works best?

When determining what types of involvement work best, a major report by the Southwest Educational Development Laboratory (SEDL) found one common factor: "Programs and interventions that engage families in supporting their children's learning at home are linked to higher student achievement." Examples abound:

- A literacy program in Minnesota that included home and school activities on literacy for kindergartners and their families generated significant positive gains. In addition, children who began the program with the lowest scores recorded the greatest gains.
- In West Virginia, nine schools sought to enhance parents' skills by offering workshops at school entrance at which the adults received learning packets in reading and math and training on how to use them. Students with more highly involved parents made stronger reading and math gains than less involved parents. The finding was apparent across all income levels. In addition, family income had no effect on involvement, as low-income families were just as likely to attend the workshops as higher-income families.

For older students, parent involvement with academics largely focused on enabling parents to convey high expectations to their children, encouraging them to take and succeed in rigorous courses with an eye toward college. For example:

- When families knew about and guided high school students to classes that would lead to higher education, students were more likely to enroll in a higher-level program, earn credits, and score higher on tests. Regardless of family background, the issue of parent expectations had the strongest effect on grade 12 test scores in all subjects. (Catasambis, 1998)

But how do schools engage families in supporting learning at home? Interactive homework assignments that bring together parents and their children work well. One of the leading examples is an initiative designed by Epstein and her Johns Hopkins colleagues called TIPS.

- At the elementary level, the parent describes their child's work on the activities and whether the child understands a concept or needs more assistance.
- At the high school level, the activities require specific parent involvement to complete, and parents answer whether the assignment helped them learn what their child is doing in class.

What about other types of involvement?

While parent involvement with homework may be the award-winning strategy, that doesn't mean that more traditional forms of parent involvement are useless. For example, targeted communication programs have proved effective, especially with solving problems that are typically barriers to student achievement, such as attendance or school discipline.

But parent involvement strategies, while important, are not a cure-all for a struggling school. "School, family, and community partnerships can boost attendance and increase achievement slightly, but excellent classroom teaching will be needed to dramatically improve students' writing, reading, and math skills to meet the state's standards." (SEDL)

Create a partnership around student learning

Parents want to be involved in children's education. Teachers and schools believe that involved parents benefit children. But good intentions on either side only go so far. As noted by Epstein and Sanders (2000), "Teachers, parents, and students have little understanding of each other's interests in children and schools....Most teachers do not know the goals that parents have for their children, how parents help them learn, or how parents would like to be involved. Most parents do not know much about the educational programs in their children's school or what teachers require of them." Effective parent involvement comes when a true partnership exists between schools and families. Creating that partnership, especially around academics, is what works for student achievement.

Actions school boards can take:

- As SEDL concluded: "Recognize that all parents, regardless of income, education or cultural background, are involved in their children's learning and want their children to do well."
- Survey parents and teachers to understand their perspective on parent involvement. Investigate how parents want to be involved, and how teachers want parents to be involved.
- Work to create a common understanding of how parents could best support their child's education and how teachers could communicate with parents. This might be accomplished through discussions, flyers, meetings or other strategies.
- Identify barriers to achievement within schools. Can parents help address these challenges? If so, how?
- Give teachers training on how to develop homework assignments that involve parents.
- Regularly involve parents in their child's homework, and report on the results of doing so.
- In middle school and high school, talk clearly to parents about the courses and grades their students will need to succeed.
- Continue to survey or otherwise track the effects of involvement, in order to use schools' time and resources wisely. In these tight economic times, focus on putting schools' money and energy into what works best, rather than continuing ineffective programs.

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This summary is based on a report written for the Center for Public Education by Chuck Dervarics and Eileen O'Brien. O'Brien is an independent education researcher and consultant in Alexandria, Virginia. Much of her work has focused on access to quality education for disadvantaged and minority populations. O'Brien has a Master of Public Administration from George Washington University and a Bachelor of Science degree in psychology from Loyola University, Chicago. Chuck Dervarics is an education writer and former editor of Report on Preschool Programs, a national independent newsletter on pre-k, Head Start, and child care policy. As a writer and researcher, he has contributed to case studies and research projects of the Southern Education Foundation, the American Council on Education, and the Massachusetts Board of Higher Education, often focusing on issues facing disadvantaged populations. Dervarics has a Bachelors degree from George Washington University.

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