



School Daze:

The Opportunities and Implications of Parental Involvement in K-12 Public Education

INTRODUCTION

Many years of research have resulted in a broad consensus among researchers, education professionals and education experts: Parental involvement and engagement are significantly important to the academic performance and outcomes of students.

The role of parents in their children's overall social, emotional and psychological growth and development is a common definition applied to parental involvement. And the level of parent participation in school-related activities and their interactions with school-building education personnel is another way to describe parental engagement.

With these historical developments and research findings, parental involvement and engagement in education has become a key focus of current policies and programs that are aimed at improving the academic outcomes of students at risk for academic underachievement (Altschul, 2011). But even with the focus on parental engagement provided by researchers and others, many questions abound: Is there a critical role for parents in their children's cognitive development throughout their children's educational experiences? Is there a specific role that parents should play in relation to schools? Is parental engagement a one-size-fits-all approach, or does it vary by family and community? Are there other factors, such as student resilience and family education advocacy that are more reliable determinants of success? These are some of the questions that this report seeks to address.

When considering the academic performance of students in school, especially urban schools, there are several factors deemed to be critically important. These factors include, but are not limited to: the quality of the education received in school; resources available to aid students in their academic pursuits; the learning environment and school culture; student readiness for school; parental involvement in the child's cognitive, emotional and social development and academic activities; and parental engagement in the child's school. These factors, along with other student performance elements, contribute to the creation of an environment, at home and in the school building that primes students for academic success.

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September 2014



Of these critically important factors, parental involvement and parental engagement have been the focus of academic research and study for more than 40 years and are considered by many to be paramount to success. Moreover, keen attention has been given to parental involvement and parental engagement issues and activities since the United States Congress passed the “No Child Left Behind Act” in 2001. This policy is being used to encourage educators to develop and pursue strategies and programs that improve parental involvement, especially for schools serving higher proportions of low-income children (Altschul, 2011).

The majority of parents living in the United States believe that a good education is an important part of ensuring their children’s future well-being (Cole & Omari, 2003; Stevenson, Chen & Uttal, 1990). For example, African-American and Latino parents report higher educational aspirations for their children than European-American parents (Stevenson, et, al., 1990). Education research focusing on the relationship between parental involvement and engagement and student academic achievement reveals that there is a correlation with higher student outcomes. The research findings were significant, whether the outcomes measured were grades, teacher ratings, standardized tests or other performance measures. Additionally, the association between parental involvement and engagement and higher student academic outcomes were consistent for the overall student population, including minority student populations such as African-American and Latino students.

There is little disagreement among education professionals, academic researchers, and governmental officials that parental involvement and parental engagement in school-related activities are critically important in the academic success of students at home or in their communities. The disagreement occurs when this same group chooses to define the roles of parents in their children’s education. Due to low parent participation in school-related activities, these stakeholders have great concerns about the importance parents place on their children’s education, especially in urban communities. This perception of parents by school personnel, coupled with increased academic performance standards, has led to greater frustration with “uninvolved” parents, who are often unable to meet the expectations established by external parties. The perceived lack of parental interest in their children’s academic success and low participation in school-related activities has significantly weakened the relationship between school personnel and parents. As a result, in many instances education stakeholders define the role of parents in their students’ academic endeavors by using their own criteria, with little or no input from parents, parent groups or parent advocates. This one-sided approach has proven ineffective in school districts across the country.

PolicyBridge, founded in 2005, is a non-partisan, 501(c)3 research and advocacy think tank that prompts and sustains high quality discourse about public policy issues affecting African Americans and other underserved communities to enlighten citizens and catalyze action. Special thanks to Sharon Sobol Jordan, Elizabeth Newman and the staff of the Centers for Families and Children for providing organizational support, content expertise and feedback on the development of this research report.

Defining Parental Involvement

When referring in this report to parental involvement and/or parental engagement we do not limit our definition of this group to parents exclusively. In fact, we intend our definition to be much broader to include those individuals who are the primary caregivers for their students. We realize that parenting activities are provided by a host of caring individuals who are not biological parents, but who fill that role daily.

In 2001, the “No Child Left Behind Act” described parental involvement as regular participation of parents, and as a two-way process and meaningful communication involving student academic learning and other activities. This includes assisting their child’s learning; being actively involved in the child’s education in school; serving as full partners in their child’s education and being included, as appropriate, in decision making and on advisory committees to assist in the education of the child; and, also, in the carrying out of other activities such as those described in section 1118 of the ESEA Section 910(32).

The National Parent Teacher Association (PTA) defines parental involvement as the participation of parents in every facet of children’s education and development, from birth to adulthood, recognizing that parents are the primary influence in children’s lives.

However, the results of PolicyBridge’s opinion research process, which surveyed parents, students, education professionals, public officials, representatives from philanthropy and community-based nonprofit personnel in Northeast Ohio, found that most individuals thought that the definition focused on parents’ social, emotional, psychological and educational interactions with their children primarily out-of-school.

An analysis of the various definitions from parental involvement researchers and PolicyBridge’s opinion research reveals that there are common elements in each. The common elements are active involvement in the child’s developmental learning, including the following:

- Encouraging a sense of curiosity
- Placing value on the importance of education
- Fostering a love of learning
- Reviewing daily school-work
- Participating in decision making opportunities

Defining Parental Engagement

From our study of parental involvement we have found that academic researchers, education professionals and public officials define parental engagement in many different ways. Some refer to parental engagement as though it is a subset of parental involvement. Some parental involvement researchers use the terms “parental engagement” and “parental involvement” interchangeably. We also found that some researchers, educators and public officials define these terms separately, so as to distinguish the different policies, strategies and activities that are required to understand the unique problems related to parental involvement, in contrast to parental engagement.

One general definition of parental engagement is the meaningfulness of the parents’ interactions with school officials regarding their child’s education at school. This definition of parental engagement also includes parents’ experiences and actions with school officials in the school building. School officials include teachers, teacher’s assistants, principals and other personnel, in addition to school district personnel and Board of Education members. Among those individuals that PolicyBridge interviewed, we found that many believed parental engagement strategies and activities were driven primarily by the school district and by individual school building personnel, with little input from parents or parent groups and advocates.

As stated in the introduction, the important distinction is that parental involvement implies parents’ active participation in the educational growth and cognitive development of their children, while parental engagement denotes parents’ interactions with school district and building personnel to foster their children’s academic success.

School Readiness and Student Academic Success

Another critically important aspect of both parental involvement and parental engagement is the readiness of students. Student readiness is a key element of student academic success in schools. School readiness refers to the developmental status of children when they enter school, with a specific emphasis on competencies that influence later academic success (Snow, 2006). When thinking about student readiness for school in a broader sense, it means students are being prepared to learn and to gain mastery of the subject-matter being taught in school.

Research has demonstrated that the relationship between student school readiness and parental involvement and parental engagement is strong, particularly in the earliest years, prior to kindergarten. This will be addressed later in the report.

The community stakeholders interviewed during our research study defined student school readiness as being *socially* and *emotionally* prepared to confront the challenges that accompany an academic school year, and having the proper attitude to be successful. This includes students being ready to listen, learn and self-regulate themselves in the classroom and school building. It also means that academic and non-academic challenges do not interfere with cognitive activities and social interactions.

PolicyBridge’s opinion research participants described student school readiness as a critical functional element of parental involvement and parental engagement that aligns with student academic success. We conclude from both the academic research and our opinion research that school readiness is important not only upon entry into pre-kindergarten or kindergarten, but throughout students’ academic careers. It could also be argued that in an urban core setting, social and emotional development has a heightened importance. Unfortunately, many parents who provide this type of support are often disregarded or discounted when they should be commended or celebrated. It is important to remember that any level of parental involvement is a step in the right direction.

Educational Growth and Cognitive Development

PolicyBridge's opinion research revealed various activities by parents that support the educational growth and cognitive development of students. Opinion research participants identified the following list of activities as important when discussing student educational and development growth. These include:

- Talking to their children
- Allowing children opportunities to play in a way that enhances their cognitive and social development
- Reading to their children and exposing them to vocabulary and language
- Seeking out and enrolling children in a high quality pre-K setting
- Conveying to children the importance of education; valuing school as well as the education experience
- Making sure their children are at school each day on time and ready to learn
- Fostering the physical and emotional health of children
- Interacting with schools to fully understand what children are expected to know during the academic year
- Ensuring children get the proper amount of sleep
- Checking homework daily and asking questions about what is occurring at school
- Fostering an interest in reading
- Providing constant motivation and encouragement to children
- Listening and understanding the challenges children experience

It was agreed by those interviewed that when parents pursue the activities previously identified, they establish an environment that reinforces their interest in the cognitive, social and emotional well-being of their children. There was broad consensus among the community stakeholders interviewed that cognitive growth, in addition to the social and emotional well-being of children, first begins in their homes. Relatedly, there is a growing body of research that says that the social and emotional development of children is one of the most critical factors in academic success because it gives them the ability to self-advocate, provides confidence, and enhances their ability to be determined not to quit when difficulties arise. Social and emotional development also enables persuasion and increases resiliency among children. Conversely, research makes it abundantly clear that social and emotional instability impedes a child's ability to learn and disrupts the teacher's classroom environment.

The Problem

As has been cited throughout the report thus far, researchers have found that the most accurate predictor of student achievement in school is not income or social status, but the extent to which that student's family is able to create a home environment that encourages learning, expresses high but realistic expectations for the child's achievement and future career, and gets parents involved in the child's education in school and in the community. Researchers and education professionals have determined that parental influences have considerable impact from kindergarten up to the high school levels (Young, Austin & Growe, 2007). Education researchers have also discovered that parents who are involved with their child's education directly support learning while indirectly encouraging achievement (Gonzales-DeHass, Willems & Doan Holbein, 2005).

Parents, students, school officials and community stakeholders interviewed for this report agreed with the research findings that both parental involvement in a child's education and parental engagement in a child's school were significant factors when discussing student academic performance and outcomes. So, one might ask, since research results related to parental involvement and student academic outcomes are so positive, why is parental involvement generally low for all parents, but especially for ethnic-minority, language-minority, and lower resource families (Young, Austin & Growe, 2007)?

One reason for low parent participation is the differing perceptions of parental involvement and parental engagement held by parents and education professionals. Another reason for low parent participation at home and in school relates to the strategies and tactics used by school officials and personnel to encourage parent participation. In fact, we believe low parent participation rates may not truly reflect parents' levels of interest (or lack thereof), but rather an inability to meet unrealistic expectations, given the family's challenges and environmental conditions. The manner in which schools structure parent participation activities at home and in school also poses many significant problems.

Joyce L. Epstein, Ph.D., is a research professor of sociology, and Director of the Center on School, Family and Community Partnership and the National Network of Partnership Schools at Johns Hopkins University. In 2001 she developed a framework that identifies six types of parental involvement that foster student academic outcomes. This framework describes types of activities parents should participate in with their children at home, as well as parental engagement activities with teachers and school building leadership. The premise for the creation of the framework was to establish a common bridge of understanding between parents and school personnel with a set of defined parental activities that would specifically target and support student academic achievement.

The following is Epstein's framework:

Parenting: Help all families establish home environments to support children as students

- Parent education and other courses or training for parents (e.g. GED, college credits, family literacy)
- Family support programs to assist families with health, nutrition and other services
- Home visits at transition points to pre-school, elementary, middle and high school

<p>Communicating: Design effective forms of school-to-home communications about school programs and children’s progress</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Conferences with every parent at least once a year ■ Language translators to assist families as needed ■ Regular schedule of useful notices, memos, phone calls, newsletters and other communications
<p>Volunteering: Recruit and organize parent help and support</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ School and classroom volunteer program to help teachers, administrators, students and other parents ■ A parent room or family center for volunteer work meetings and resources for families ■ Annual postcard survey to identify all available talents, times and locations of volunteers
<p>Learning at Home: Provide information and ideas to families about how to help students at home with homework and other curriculum-related activities, decisions and planning</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Information for families on skills required for students in all subjects in each grade ■ Information on homework policies and how to monitor and discuss schoolwork at home ■ Family participation in setting goals each year and in planning for college or work
<p>Decision Making: Include parents in school decisions, developing parent leaders and representatives</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Active PTA/PTO or other parent organizations, advisory councils or committees for parent leadership and participation ■ Independent advocacy group to lobby and work for school reform and improvements ■ Networks to link all families with parental representatives
<p>Collaborating with Community: Identify and integrate resource and services from the community to strengthen school programs, family practices and student learning and development</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Information for students and families on community health, cultural, recreational, social support and other program/services ■ Information on community activities that link to learning skills and talents, including summer programs for students

The National PTA working with the U.S. Congress in 2002 created the Parent Act as a means to strengthen parent participation policies in the “Elementary and Secondary Education Act” (ESEA) also known as the “No Child Left Behind Act.” The National PTA, using the parental involvement framework created by Dr. Joyce Epstein, developed National Standards for Parent /Family Involvement in an effort to provide the perspective of parents who believed that their voices were not adequately represented in the “No Child Left Behind Act.”. The National Standards Parent/Family Involvement Program is as follows.

Standard I:	Communicating - Communication between home and schools is regular, two-way and meaningful
Standard II:	Parenting – Parenting skills are promoted and supported
Standard III:	Student Learning – Parents play an integral role in assisting student learning
Standard IV:	Volunteering – Parents are welcome in the school and their support and assistance are sought
Standard III:	School Decision Making and Advocacy – Parents are full partners in the decisions that affect their children and families
Standard IV:	Collaborating with Community – Community resources are used to strengthen schools, families and student learning

Reviewing both Epstein’s Framework and National PTA’s National Standards, the role of parents in fostering the academic success of their students seems to reflect an orientation or philosophy that is significantly informed by education professionals and experts. We know that education professionals have determined that parents’ low levels of involvement and interactions with school personnel in the educational growth and cognitive development of their children is a significant problem. Researchers and education professionals continue to ask why parent participation is generally low for most parents but especially among ethnic-minority, language-minority and lower- resource families.

In school districts where there are large populations of racial and ethnic minorities and low resource families, involving and engaging parents in school-related activities can be an extremely difficult task. This phenomenon causes negative perceptions of parents among school officials and building personnel.

Parental Perspectives of Parental Involvement and Engagement

During PolicyBridge's opinion research we discovered that parents (especially ethnic minorities and lower resource families) face challenges that prevent them from fulfilling the educational preparation aspirations developed by researchers and education professionals for their children. Below is a list of the challenges and barriers mentioned most often by the community stakeholders interviewed during our opinion research:

- Parents are not able to keep up with all of the changes that school systems make in the name of school reform so they turn off and become disengaged
- Parents' challenging lives are not taken into consideration by school personnel when asking parents to be engaged
- Schools are not flexible, so parents have a difficult time finding ways to intersect and interact with them
- Generally, parents lack knowledge of the things they should be doing to assist with their child's academic success
- Many parents were not successful in school and had highly negative experiences with educators, so they feel inadequate and frustrated with schools
- There is a lack of diversity among the population teaching and leading school—so parents are reluctant to speak frankly about their children's needs with teachers
- There are students and parents with cultural issues that speak to the need for increased cultural competency among teachers
- Parents have work schedules that do not allow lots of flexibility; they may work multiple jobs to support their families
- Parents struggle to make enough money to support their families, as many of them are single parents and the sole source of financial support
- Parents are busy with daily life and thus have all the hassles that make their lives stressful and frustrating
- Financial difficulties are barriers
- It is difficult for parents to foster the cognitive, social and emotional well-being of their children when they themselves are distracted by multiple stressors

The challenges and barriers listed above can be distilled into several thematic areas. These areas are: parents' negative perceptions of teachers and schools; employment patterns; time constraints; parental educational attainment and competencies; daily life challenges, particularly those associated with socioeconomic status, and school climate and culture. These challenges and barriers undermine the trust parents need to build strong relationships with school officials and personnel. Better and stronger relationships between parents and education professionals will lead to improved parent participation at home and in school.

Opinion research participants described several key parental involvement and parental engagement factors that are not highly considered by school personnel when developing parental engagement strategies and parental involvement expectations. These factors include the following: many parents do not feel comfortable in the school environment or talking to teachers; there are a lack of parent-centered programs in schools to help parents in their educational-support roles with their children; parents' interactions with school personnel are not usually designed to foster two-way communication that is mutually beneficial; school personnel at times are patronizing and condescending, giving off messages that undermine trust-building activities with parents; and education professionals in many instances dictate educational expectations to parents without allowing input from those parents. These factors, when overlooked by school personnel, lead to misunderstandings between parents and education professionals.

When thinking about the relationship between parental involvement and engagement and student academic success, consideration must be given to the challenges and barriers parents confront daily that interfere with their ability to be involved in their student's education, to the degree and depth that educational professionals and others deem sufficient. The struggles of parents to meet the basic needs of their children, such as providing adequate amounts of food; proper clothing for school; a decent and safe place to live; and maintaining the students' mental and physical well-being are competing priorities parents face every day, all of which happen to contribute to student success. Without understanding the support parents need and want from schools, governments and other community organizations to aid their children in achieving academically, the remedy for the ultimate academic success of these students remains unbalanced and unclear.

PolicyBridge's opinion research, which was conducted with parents, found that they feel constrained by the structure and operating systems in school districts and in school buildings. Many are intimidated by school environments and personnel because they have not previously had successful interactions with teachers, school administrators or the education system during their own academic pursuits. Additionally, many have identified difficulty in communicating their children's academic aspirations and needs when they are attempting to advocate on behalf of their children. Parents also said that they do not feel welcome in school buildings. As such, the ability to effectively communicate with school personnel and be respected by education professionals are significant barriers that prevent a meaningful collaborative relationship between parents and school personnel.

The issues causing low parent participation and engagement in their children's academic success, either at home or at school, cannot be resolved without parents and school personnel modifying their beliefs, attitudes and behaviors to create opportunities for improved outcomes for all parties.

Re-Thinking and Re-Designing Parental Involvement and Engagement Structures

When thinking about how to modify parent and school personnel beliefs, attitudes and behaviors about parental involvement and parental engagement in the home and school building, examining the definition of these terms and how those definitions work in real life is a good place to begin. The revised definition for parental involvement and engagement must contain the perspectives, aspirations and expectations of parents and education professionals to ensure that it represents their combined thinking. Research indicates that parental engagement flourishes when trusting relationships exist among parents, school districts and school building personnel. To foster such trusting relationships, assumptions and judgments about each group must be minimized. Schools must provide open access to parents (especially in school buildings) and be transparent about their academic and operational processes if they expect parents to actively engage in school-related activities that support student academic performance. At home, parents must create an environment that fosters the social, emotional and cognitive development of their children, and emphasize to them the importance of getting an education and achieving academic success.

Parents and education professionals need to examine their roles in the dysfunctional relationship that currently exists between them. Pointing the finger at each other for the low level of parent participation in children's academic endeavors only perpetuates the existing dysfunctional relationship and does not provide an opportunity to change current conditions. When asked, education professionals and parents consistently state that they want students to succeed academically. But this stated goal, articulated by both parents and education professionals, does not truly reflect the nature of their relationship, their views toward each other, and what really occurs in practice. It has been difficult for parents and education professionals to make the significant investments required to actually build the collaborative relationship that will re-define parental expectations, and to increase parent participation in their children's academic endeavors at home and in school.

If parents and education professionals want to increase the level of parent participation in student academic endeavors at home and in the school building, they must re-think what they want to accomplish and why; determine what success looks like; identify the partners and relationships needed to be successful; and illuminate the challenges and barriers that would impede success. This assessment should not only include parents and education professionals, but must also include other key community stakeholders. Community stakeholders must become more involved and take advantage of opportunities to help in crafting a community-involved education structure with strategies and actions that improve student academic outcomes. This could include school advisory boards and formal partnerships with churches, higher education institutions and businesses. Input from such groups will change the overall dynamics of current discussions between parents and school personnel and infuse new thinking about low parent participation and what could be done about it.

Once the partnership dynamics between parents and school personnel have changed to include civic, community and faith-based organizations, re-designing the programmatic and operating structures for parent participation at home and in the school building can begin. There are several programs that both parents and education professionals need to create, refresh and re-invigorate so that meaningful parent participation can occur.

It would also be very helpful if resources were allocated to ensure that intermediaries are hired to facilitate communication and trust-building between parents and education professionals and among civic, community and faith-based organizations. These emissaries would provide technical assistance to parents, school personnel and all other community stakeholders, ensuring that potential challenges and barriers that would interfere with the partnership's success would be identified and resolved. Surrounding schools, school personnel, and parents with targeted resources would make student academic achievement a priority and make parent participation a critically important element of the student achievement priority.

Conclusions

It is clear from the academic research cited and the opinion research conducted that there are several reasons for the misunderstandings that exist between parents and education professionals, which significantly undermine trust. The lack of trust also means that the mutual credibility, dependability, and respect needed by parents and education professionals impedes their ability to engage in activities that support students' academic success. Both parents and education professionals want students to be successful and to achieve academically. But their perceptions of each other clearly do not allow for parents and education professionals to work collaboratively to ensure that they fully realize the academic achievement outcomes they seek.

Communication between parents and school personnel should not only be driven by the needs and perceptions of school personnel when considering student academic achievement methods and activities. In fact, the education research literature clearly establishes strategies that would promote open and authentic two-way communication between school personnel with parents. This not only means making effective communication with parents a priority, but it also means learning new and innovative communication strategies and techniques that are different from the strategies and techniques currently used.

Parents can no longer be passive participants in the cognitive, emotional and social development of their children. They must understand that they are their children's first teachers. They also must accept the primary responsibility for ensuring their child's cognitive, emotional and social well-being. Parents must be open to accepting assistance from schools, civic, community and faith-based organizations that provide services and resources that remediate or eliminate the barriers and challenges they confront each day. They must be willing to become actively engaged in all activities that build confidence and psychological security in their children. Building confidence and creating psychological security in children is the foundation for future academic success. Parents do not have to do these things without assistance, and they must be open to that assistance when offered.

To change the current dynamic between parents and school personnel there is a need to re-think what parental involvement and engagement really means in the 21st century. We must reconsider the definitions, identify realistic goals and expectations, and broaden participation in re-designing parental involvement and engagement goals, activities and expectations.

There are several examples of civic, community and faith-based organizations joining parents and school personnel to re-think, re-design and re-discover the value of community collaboration to remedy an issue as important as successfully educating all of the children in a community. Making this issue a community priority, where all hands are on deck, creates a community mentality that provides resources and support: This is the most effective strategy to accomplish a very difficult goal.

Additional Research Conclusions Linking Pre-School to K-12 Education

The most critical period of learning occurs in the early years of a child's life, between birth and the start of kindergarten. Early family conditions are powerful in shaping a child's later success as an adult, according to the research of James J. Heckman, a Nobel Prize-winning economist and a professor at the University of Chicago. While cognitive skills are critical to success, it is these "soft" skills learned in the earliest years of life that have "hard" effects on the course of a child's life in later years. Heckman and other experts like Paul Tough include in the list of soft skills – also known as non-cognitive or social/emotional skills – character traits such as motivation, sociability, communication, ability to pay attention, self-regulation, self-control and self-esteem, perseverance, curiosity, conscientiousness, optimism and resilience. In the early years, a child learns soft skills by imitating her parents' reactions to the world – both what they do and what they don't do. The family home is a child's first classroom and parents are a child's first teachers.

Ellen Galinsky, in her book "Mind in the Making," identifies seven essential life skills that all children need to develop in the early years to be successful adults in the 21st century. Because these skills all involve the prefrontal cortex of the brain, they are often referred to by researchers as "executive functions" of the brain. Here's the problem: Neuroscientific research by Jack Shonkoff and the Harvard Center on the Developing Child tells us that frequent or continual stress on young children who lack adequate protection and support from adults is strongly associated with increases in the risks of lifelong health and social problems. In other words, the "toxic stress" experienced by children will make them sick as adults. It is the prefrontal cortex of the brain that is most affected by this "toxic stress" – the very same part of the brain that children need to develop the essential executive functions Galinsky tells us they must have to succeed in school and life.

Shonkoff's research shows that, for a child exposed to "toxic stress," regular good parenting in the early years can make a profound difference in a child's future prospects. Forming a secure attachment with a parent fosters a resilience that acts as a protective buffer against stress, and yields tangible benefits in later years for the child. For example, these children are more likely to graduate high school, stay out of jail, delay pregnancy, and have positive relationships with their own children.

The goal of pre-school education is to get a child ready for kindergarten. Pre-school also should be a safe space for parents to learn and practice – *with teachers by their side* – how to model strong “soft” skills, and to create secure attachments with their children. It also is the perfect training ground for parents to get ready to be good partners with teachers for the next 13 years, until their child’s high school graduation.

Recommendations

1. Use New Terminology

Redefine the meaning of both parental involvement and parental engagement, in a fashion that focuses on the values that foster successful student outcomes. Introduce different terminology that describes a new kind of relationship between parents and school personnel, and incorporate terms like “trust”, “mutual respect,” “shared purpose” and most importantly, “partnership.” Allow parents and guardians to lead the work of establishing these new terms and share their conclusions with teachers and school administrators.

Phase out the term “parental engagement/involvement” and replace it with language or terms that are more appropriate or fitting for today’s family structure. Terms such as “family advocate,” “community advocate,” “guardian” and “caregiver” better reflect the current reality of extended families and community members who are raising today’s students. These terms also point to the need to rethink how these caregivers interact with schools and school personnel.

2. Ask Better Questions

Often-asked questions like “How do we engage parents?” and “Why aren’t parents engaged?” are not productive. Reframe the questions to change the conversation by considering these new questions: “What kind of partnership do we need between parents, school personnel and the community to best support a child’s success in school?” and “Why is the partnership between parents, school personnel and the broader community breaking down?” When these types of questions are asked, the conversation immediately changes from “What’s wrong with parents?” to “What is the best way for parents, school personnel and the community to work together so that children succeed?” This discussion framework is a much more productive place to start.

3. Support Parents and School Personnel as Partners

A. Intermediaries

Broaden the partnership between parents and education professionals to include civic, community and faith-based organizations that are interested in student achievement and educational outcomes. Leverage these groups as advisory boards, conveners and investors that can address and improve the challenges associated with urban education. These community champions can also aid parents and school personnel in focusing their energies on activities that best promote student academic achievement.

Parents, education professionals and the community must stop the finger-pointing ‘blame game,’ and recognize that parents, education professionals and the broader community are responsible for the current academic conditions that exist. We must move beyond this dysfunction to create new mutually beneficial partnerships that work.

Redesign and revise parent participation programs, operating structures and procedures in schools so that innovative programs can be initiated that engage parents with schools. Conducting teacher/family conferences, engaging parents and guardians on curriculum design committees and designating a parent office and meeting spaces in schools are just a few examples that could change the way and extent to which parents engage and/or connect with schools.

Hire civic, community and faith-based emissaries to serve as intermediaries between parents and school personnel to facilitate communication and build trust. One specific group of individuals to hire and train would be parent liaisons, who could serve as brokers to facilitate and nurture the ongoing relationships and partnerships among parents, school personnel and community stakeholders.

B. Media

Challenge the media to reshape the public perception of what defines meaningful and high-impact engagement by parents or guardians when it comes to schools. Debunk myths and outdated perspectives and tell stories of the many approaches that parents and guardians employ to remain involved and engaged in the lives of youth, and the schools that they attend.

4. Shape Public Policy

The consequences of poor parenting are not just felt by individual children but by society at large. Establish a policy agenda and political platform that recognizes the contribution of parenting to mobility and opportunity, and tackles the “parenting gap,” as it is referred to by the Brookings Center on Children and Families.

5. Start Early

Help parents access the tools and support needed to be nurturing adults and to create secure attachments with their children. Children that lack secure attachments to parents are more vulnerable to “toxic stress” and as a consequence are more likely to be adversely affected by a negative environment and/or experience delays in social-emotional development (Shonkoff and Harvard).

Intently focus on the first 2,000 days of life for children, because this is when 90% of brain development happens. Forge partnerships with parents and pre-K teachers that focus on the first 2,000 days to ensure a smooth transition into the K-12 educational system.

Support parents in taking care of their own physical health, mental health and educational pursuits; this can enhance their skills and abilities to be active and engaged parents and advocates.



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