
Family Involvement in Education: How Important Is It? What Can Legislators Do?

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Policymakers interested in promoting school success must look beyond the school door. The last 15 years of school reform have focused on course curriculum, instructional methods, and teacher training. Yet these reforms have not accomplished as much as they might because academic achievement is shaped more by children's lives outside the school walls, particularly their parents. When parents are involved, students get better grades, score higher on standardized tests, have better attendance records, drop out less often, have higher aspirations, and more positive attitudes toward school and homework. What's more, these positive impacts seem most important for children growing up in disadvantaged, highly-stressed families. The good news is that the average cost for building family, school, and community partnerships is \$20 to \$30 per pupil per year for all school, district, and state expenses. Policymakers can also help families educate their children with child care, summer school, and out-of-school programs—all which have promising evidence on their benefits to student achievement.

To improve student achievement, the last 15 years of school reform have focused on course curriculum, instructional methods, and teacher training. Yet Steinberg¹ claims that these reforms have accomplished very little, because academic achievement is shaped more by children's lives outside the school walls, particularly their parents, peers, and how they spend out-of-school time. Policymakers interested in ensuring a good education for all children must look beyond the school door. This chapter examines nonschool influences on academic achievement. We focus primarily on parental involvement in their child's schooling, but we also discuss child care, summer school, and out-of-school programs.

Why Should Parents Be Involved in Their Child's Schooling?

Recently Harvard Professor Robert Putnam² said that given a choice between a 10% increase in school budgets or a 10% increase in parent involvement, he would invest in parent involvement.

Another best-selling author, Professor Laurence Steinberg,¹ agrees that parental involvement is key to children's success in school. He writes that our high school graduates are among the least intellectually competent in the industrialized world. Steinberg assembles an impressive body of evidence indicating that the problem of poor academic achievement is "genuine, substantial, and pervasive across ethnic, socioeconomic, and age groups" (p. 184).¹ Youngsters' success in school affects how they do later in life and, in the United States, is one of the surest ways to move families out of poverty.³

Parental school involvement is most important for children growing up in disadvantaged, highly-stressed families.

If this country is going to turn around poor school performance, one of the most significant problems that must be addressed is the high prevalence of disengaged parents. A lack of interest on the part of parents is associated with academic difficulties and low school achievement. Steinberg² estimated that nearly 1 in 3 parents in this country is disengaged from their adolescent's life and particularly their adolescent's school:

Only about one-fifth of parents consistently attend school programs. Nearly one-third of students say their parents have no idea how they are doing in school. About one-sixth of all students report that their parents don't care whether they earn good grades in school or not (p. 187).¹

Clearly, lack of parental interest and involvement in their child's schooling is not the only influence on poor academic achievement. School failure is also associated with a peer culture that downplays academic success, students' beliefs about the causes of school success and failure, young people's excessive time spent in after-school jobs, teaching practices that do not engage students and encourage critical thinking, low quality child care, too few school-sponsored extracurricular activities, and a lack of programs for out-of-school time.¹

How Important Is Parental School Involvement to School Success? Does It Benefit All Children?

A consistent body of research concludes that parents are the first and foremost influence on their children's development and school success. When parents are involved, students get better grades and score higher on standardized tests. What's more, children of involved parents have better attendance records, drop out less often, have higher aspirations, and more positive attitudes toward school and homework.^{4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11}

But does this positive impact of parental involvement apply to all families or just to those with more education and material advantages? Bogenschneider⁵ studied 8,000 high school students in nine high schools in Wisconsin and California. With only a couple exceptions, when parents were involved in their teen's schooling, kids reported higher grades in school. Moreover, when either mothers or fathers were involved, it benefited the grades of both boys and girls. Parental school involvement had positive effects when parents had less than a high school education or more than a college degree. What's more, the benefits held for Asian, Black, Hispanic, and White teens in single-parent, step-family, or two-parent biological families. Finally, parental school involvement seems most important for those children who need it most—children growing up in disadvantaged, highly-stressed families.^{5, 8}

In fairness, however, not all types of parent involvement are equally beneficial to school success. Parents can be involved by helping their child learn at home, volunteering in school, or serving on school decision-making bodies.¹² To date, the strongest evidence that parent involvement helps improve school success comes when parents get involved in helping their child learn at home.^{8, 13} However, when parents get involved at school, emerging evidence suggests that it can strengthen school reform efforts.^{14, 15}

Do We Know How to Mount Programs to Improve Parental School Involvement?

Virtually, all parents say they value education for their children.¹⁶ Parental involvement in schooling is one concrete way that parents act on this value. Students must make a number of decisions about courses, activities, programs, and opportunities that will affect their futures. According to Epstein,¹⁷ parents need to be involved in these decisions as knowledgeable partners. They need to know how the school system works, what programs and activities are available, how these decisions will affect their child's chances for future success, which courses are needed to prepare for future jobs and careers, what teachers expect in their courses for students to do well, and in what ways parents can get involved in decisions that affect how schools operate.

Parents are also involved at home by ensuring their children attend school, providing a variety of reading materials and learning opportunities, and limiting excessive television viewing.¹² One of the most important ways that parents can influence their children's achievement, however, is by conveying to their children high expectations that they will do well in school.^{13, 18}

The need for parental involvement is clear. But do we know how to mount effective programs to increase parents' involvement in their child's schooling? We have some evidence that parental school involvement is a skill that can be taught and learned. Programs that promote school involvement, particularly among disadvantaged families, are promising but still in need of replication.^{18, 19, 20, 21, 22}

We do know, however, that parental involvement is strongest in elementary school and, without special efforts, few families continue as active partners with the school during the middle and high school years.^{8, 11} We also know that the most important influence on whether parents are included or excluded from involvement in their child's education is teachers and administrators. What the teacher does has proven more important in how knowledgeable parents are about helping their child with school work than parents' education or marital status.¹⁷ In fact, the Harvard Family Research Project has recently compiled the skills, knowledge and attitudes necessary for teachers to work successfully with families.²³

How Much Do School, Family, and Community Partnerships Cost?

One way that policymakers can promote family involvement in education is by taking deliberate steps to build school, family, and community partnerships. Researchers found that schools with more funding had higher quality partnerships.^{24, 25} Also, districts that had a line item in the budget for partnerships had partnership programs of higher quality. To determine what it costs to build these partnerships, Epstein and colleagues collected data from 11 states, 67 school districts, and 566 schools. The good news is that the average cost for building these partnerships is \$20 to \$30 per pupil for all school, district, and state expenses.^{24, 25}

To help schools develop and maintain strong family, school, and community partnerships, Joyce Epstein directs the National Network of Partnership Schools, which currently includes 900 schools, 91 districts, and 17 state departments of education. Epstein has developed a checklist that schools can use to assess how family-friendly they are. This checklist is available on the Family Impact Seminar website at: <http://www.uwex.edu/ces/familyimpact/impact.htm>.

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Policymakers can help parents educate their children through child care, summer school, and out-of-school programs.

Beyond the Classroom, What Policies and Programs Help Families Educate Their Children?

Given the increasing numbers of parents in the work force, policymakers can help parents educate their children in many ways. Three examples will be given here: (1) child care, (2) summer school, and (3) out-of-school programs.

The quality of a child care setting—from poor to excellent—can affect a child today and throughout adulthood. High quality child care translates into measurable improvements in language, math, and social skills through second grade. One estimate shows substituting a poor quality caregiver with an excellent one would improve a child's school readiness by 50%. Looking even further down the road, studies which follow children into adulthood demonstrate that kids with higher quality preschool care are more likely to earn better wages and complete high school and college.^{26, 27, 28, 29, 30, 31} For further information, see the Family Impact Seminar Briefing Report on *Early Childhood Care and Education: What are States Doing* at <http://www.uwex.edu/ces/familyimpact/fis17.htm>.

In recent studies, summer school programs have helped reverse the decline in achievement that occurs among poor children during the summer months. For example, reading scores of poor children have been shown to fall about three months behind the scores of middle class children during the summer. Furthermore, these summer learning losses appear to add up over time. At the end of high school, the achievement gap between middle class and disadvantaged students could be completely explained by summer learning losses and the achievement differences when the children entered first grade. University of Wisconsin-Madison Professor Geoffrey Borman and colleagues recently evaluated the effectiveness of the Teach Baltimore Summer Academy which used college volunteers to teach summer school to kindergartners in urban, high-poverty schools. No effects occurred following the first year of the program. After the third year, however, the program significantly boosted student achievement.³²

Fueled by public concern that young people need safe places in nonschool hours, a number of out-of-school programs provide educational learning experiences for school children in supervised settings. For example, programs are provided by such organizations as University Extension's 4-H Youth Development Program, the Big Brothers and Big Sisters of America, and the 21st Century Community Learning Centers. In a recent study of 25 programs by the Harvard Family Research Project, these out-of-school time programs were linked to better performance in school, more positive attitudes toward school, higher educational aspirations, and improved school attendance. Moreover, youth in supervised programs were less involved in risky behaviors, more involved in their communities, had better social and communication skills, and were more self-confident.³³ For the full report, see the July 2003 Out-of-School Evaluation Summary published by the Harvard Family Research Project.

What Can State Policymakers Do to Promote Family Involvement in Education?

One of the most prominent researchers in this area, Joyce Epstein of Johns Hopkins University, has developed a checklist of what state legislators and school officials can do to promote parental school involvement (See the checklist on the next page).

A Checklist for Assessing the Family Impact of School Policies

When legislators and school officials are developing school finance policies, this checklist could help them identify a number of specific ways to acknowledge and support family well-being. Some of these items require funding, and others can be implemented when policymakers and public officials believe that family involvement is important to children's success in school.

- 1. Write a policy that supports comprehensive programs of family, school, and community partnership.
- 2. Establish a single office with an expert leader and adequate staff to facilitate the development and continuous improvement of programs of partnership. This office provides staff development and technical assistance and coordinates partnerships across departments.
- 3. Allocate a per-pupil expenditure or lump-sum budget for school, family, and community partnerships to cover staff and program costs.
- 4. Establish small grants and other support for developing and implementing partnerships.
- 5. Establish a clearinghouse to disseminate promising practices of partnership.
- 6. Support requirements for teacher and administrator credentials on partnerships.
- 7. Develop courses for pre-service, advanced, and/or inservice education on partnerships.
- 8. Support a master teacher, lead teacher, or professional coordinator in each school to assist with partnerships.
- 9. Develop partnership tools or products (e.g., brochures, lunch menus, calendars, newsletters, publications for all schools and families, and guidelines for communicating with non-English-speaking families).
- 10. Encourage business, industry, and other community connections to strengthen school, family, and community partnerships.
- 11. Establish an advisory committee for school, family, and community partnerships including educators, parents, and community teachers.
- 12. Institute an accountability system to monitor and evaluate progress; recognize and reward excellent work on partnerships.
- 13. Support evaluations of the effects of demonstration and ongoing partnership programs.
- 14. Conduct an annual conference for schools to share best practices with each other and to continue annual plans for improving partnership programs.

Epstein, J. L. (2001). *School, family, and community partnerships: Preparing educators and improving schools*. Boulder CO: Westview Press. (Chapter 4, pp. 349-350.)

State legislatures across the country have passed a number of laws to promote family involvement in education. Unless otherwise noted, the examples are from Epstein's recent book:¹⁷

In **Arizona**, the legislature amended a bill in 1995 to require the Department of Education to create a program that trains parents as teachers.³⁴

In 2000, the **Baltimore** city public school system mandated summer school for students in second and fourth grade whose scores on the district test were below the cutoff.³²

California passed a bill in 1994 and expanded it in 1997, which specified that employers with 25 or more employees should allow up to 40 hours for employees to participate in their child's schooling. Under this law, parents, grandparents, or guardians are permitted to use vacation time, personal or sick leave, compensatory time, or leave without pay to participate in school-related activities.

Louisiana, as of 1991, required the State Department of Education, local school boards, and schools to select parent advocates who help increase parent involvement, hear parents' complaints, and facilitate communication between schools and families.³⁴

Massachusetts passed a bill in 1996 to assess a number of parent outreach programs, with universal implementation required by the start of 1997.³⁴

In **Minnesota**, in 1990 the legislature permitted state workers who are parents to use up to 16 hours of accrued vacation time, sick leave, or other arranged time to attend parent/teacher conferences or other meetings related to their children's education.

New Jersey, in response to court decrees in the 1990s, raised the amount of money that it was spending to bring low income students up to state standards. To help poverty-affected districts meet state standards, the state provides supplemental funds for such activities as full-day kindergarten, integrated whole-school effective programs, parental outreach activities, preschool for children ages three and four, school-based youth services, and summer school.³⁵

In **Ohio**, since the 1997-98 school year, school district report cards must include their progress in building school, family, and community partnerships.

In 1984 **South Carolina** became one of the first states in the nation to mandate School Improvement Councils in every school. These councils, comprised of parents, teachers, and administrators, were charged with creating school improvement plans and developing better home/school relations.

In **Tennessee**, the legislature passed a bill in 1989 requiring schools to hold parent/teacher conferences twice a year for each student.³⁴

Virginia passed a bill in 1992 that provided eight hours of paid leave for any parent who worked for the Commonwealth. This leave could be used to meet with teachers, attend school functions, or volunteer at school.

Washington state requires specific course credits in parent involvement for teacher certification. Only about 4% to 15% of teachers have had formal classes or course work in parent involvement.

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Wisconsin has a long history of state leadership on school, family, and community partnerships. Starting with the Year of the Family in Education in 1987-88, the Department of Public Instruction (DPI) has creatively used limited resources to promote and implement partnerships based on the research of Epstein and others. In the late 1980s and early 1990s, business and foundation partners helped bring attention to the need for family involvement. Later federal Goals 2000 funds enabled the DPI to provide seed grants to schools to establish action teams and develop partnership plans aimed at connecting partnership practices to school improvement. The DPI provides resource materials, including “Learning Together” packets and training, funded by federal Title I and IV grants. Through an AmeriCorps/VISTA grant, the DPI has been able to provide VISTA (Volunteer In Service to America) members to schools to facilitate the development of partnerships. The VISTA members work with schools on implementing action team plans to help students improve reading, literacy, math, and other skills that are part of school improvement plans and measured on state tests.

In 1997, the State Superintendent established a Parent Advisory Committee. In 2002, the new state superintendent continued the concept with the establishment of the Parent Leadership Corps, which is working on the development and implementation of a DPI policy on family, school, and community partnerships. The Corps also advises the state superintendent, particularly on the No Child Left Behind Act. Wisconsin’s new teacher licensing standards (PI 34.02) include references to parents and community, including: “The teacher fosters relationships with school colleagues, parents, and agencies in the larger community to support pupil learning and well being.”

Wisconsin established the nation’s first kindergarten in 1856 and the first public kindergarten in 1873. Today, Wisconsin is one of three states that provides state funding for four-year-old kindergarten for any district that chooses to offer it. In 2003, 42% of school districts offered four-year-old kindergarten, with about two-thirds of the cost provided by the state and about one-third by the local school district. In 1991, the Legislature enhanced four-year-old kindergarten by providing assistance to districts that provide parent outreach activities. Examples of outreach activities include home visits, parent meetings at school, parent education, parent-child activities, family activity nights, orientation into and out of four-year-old kindergarten, classroom involvement training, family resource center visits, and participation in parent advisory committees.³⁶

Across the 50 states, 15 states (29%) require most or all teachers to study family development and methods to improve parent involvement. Six states (12%) require middle and high school teachers to study parent involvement and display competence in promoting parent involvement, whereas 14 states (27%) require elementary school teachers to achieve parent involvement skills. As for principals and school administrators, seven states (14%) require training in parent involvement and proficiency in encouraging parent involvement.³⁴

Wisconsin school districts that offer four-year-old kindergarten can receive state aid for parent outreach activities.

Conclusion

In a rapidly changing society with schools that differ substantially from those at the turn of the century, one fundamental thing about children and families has not changed very much at all—the central role that families play in the academic achievement of their children.³⁷ Families continue to retain primary authority and responsibility for their children’s education in legal order, moral authority, and social thought.³⁸

State policymakers have within their grasp the potential to play a powerful role in creating the conditions for families to become more involved in their children’s schooling. According to Epstein,¹⁷ funds spent on parent involvement are likely to yield a healthy return in the form of more successful students, better-informed parents, more effective teachers, fewer student failures, and fewer demands on expensive social services. In a recent study, the average cost for building family, school, and community partnerships is about \$20 to \$30 per pupil for all school, district, and state expenses.

State legislatures across the country have passed a number of laws to support other ways of involving families in education such as: requiring businesses to allow their employees time off to participate in their child’s schooling; granting state workers the right to use vacation, sick leave, or other arranged time to attend school functions; including course credits in family development and parent involvement for teacher certification; requiring schools to hold two parent/teacher conferences each year; providing supplemental funds for high-poverty districts for preschool, four-year-old kindergarten, summer school, and parent outreach activities; and requiring school district report cards to include progress on parent involvement.

To date, state legislatures have taken a number of individual actions to promote family school involvement, but to date no state has developed a comprehensive, well-funded vision for family involvement. The potential exists for a state to position itself as a leader in promoting family involvement in the education of its children. The bottom line is this: policymakers do not have a choice about whether they affect families’ ability to educate their children. They already do.

No state has developed a comprehensive well-funded vision for family involvement.

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