

# A Home-School Program in a Texas-Mexico Border School: Voices from Parents, Students, and School Staff

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## Background

As the 32<sup>nd</sup> Annual Gallup Poll illustrates, the literature is replete with examples of the problems and shortcomings of education in the United States (Rose & Gallup, 2000). This report presents an overview of ongoing evaluation research in a small, poor community near the Texas-Mexico Border that found a school district where parents and students were enthusiastic about education and test scores were rising. This school district has made a remarkable improvement in a very short time, and the evaluation team talked to parents, students, and school staff to find out their perceptions of how the school changed so dramatically so quickly. The evaluation team is still collecting quantitative data and recognizes the limitations of this preliminary research, but they wanted to share the rich qualitative data about this parental involvement in education program that comes from the voices of the key stakeholders (parents, students, and school staff).

Parental involvement in education garners broad support from citizens. Williams and Chavkin (1985) conducted a survey of more than 3,400 teachers, principals, and school superintendents and found that they were strongly interested in parental involvement in education. Louis Harris and Associates (1993) reported that teachers said strengthening parents' roles in education should be given the highest priority in education policy. In addition to teachers and school personnel wanting parental involvement in education,

when Williams and Chavkin (1985) surveyed more than 3,000 parents, they found that 99 percent of parents supported the idea of parental involvement in education. What is difficult about parental involvement in education, however, is that how and when it works effectively is often hard to explain. It is the authors' hope that the lessons learned from these often unheard voices will be helpful to others beginning parental involvement programs.

The particular home-school program used was MegaSkills®. Each school in the district had recently implemented one or more of the MegaSkills® programs (Parent Workshop, Essentials in the Classrooms, Career MegaSkills) according to the needs and interests of faculty and parents. All schools had a written plan and a core group of individuals assigned to be the MegaSkills® leaders. The eleven MegaSkills include: confidence, motivation, effort, responsibility, perseverance, caring, initiative, teamwork, problem solving, common sense, and focus. The program's founder, Dr. Dorothy Rich, calls these skills the "inner engines of learning" that are the attributes needed for success in both school and the workplace. More information on the program can be obtained from her non-profit organization, the Home and School Institute, in Washington, DC or from the latest edition of *MegaSkills®: Building Children's Achievement for the Information Age* (1998). Although this report uses the name of MegaSkills® because it was the actual home-school program used, the intent is not to exclude other quality home-school programs as viable parental involvement programs but rather to look at what general characteristics of this particular program made parental involvement so successful in this poor, rural school district on the Texas-Mexico border.

## Methodology

This rural district in Lyford, Texas is 95% Hispanic with many non-English speaking families. The district provides free breakfast and free lunch to all students. More than 80% of the students are listed as economically disadvantaged according to Texas Education Agency guidelines. Many of the students reside in colonias; others are migrant students who have their home base in this farming community. Just three years ago, the district ranked behind the state and district in reading, math, and writing scores on the Texas Assessment of Academic Skills (TAAS) test, and the district attendance rate lagged behind its peer school districts. Something happened to make a difference, and one of the key district wide programs the principals, teachers, and parents think has made a difference is a home-school program, the MegaSkills® program.

The independent evaluation team from the university collected quantitative data (achievement, behavior, and attendance) data from student records,

and this data collection process is ongoing. Qualitative data included structured interviews and open-ended surveys from 5 schools representing more than 1,600 students and their families. All principals and a random selection of students and parents were interviewed mid-year and at the end of the school year. Key questions were:

- (1) Do children increase their academic achievement (measured by Texas Assessment of Academic Skills and grades) when their schools and parents participate in the MegaSkills Program?
- (2) Do children improve their behavior and attendance (measured by state-mandated school records) when their schools and parents participate in the MegaSkills Program?
- (3) What ways of implementing this home-school program work best for the parents and students in rural, south Texas?
- (4) Are there lessons for other schools about home-school programs?

## Preliminary Quantitative Results

At one elementary school, 75% of the second grade students are now reading at grade level or above according to the Gates Reading Test. The scores on the Iowa Test of Basic Skills for this year reveal a similar improvement trend with average gains in reading as high as 14 points and gains in math as high as 19 points per grade level. In addition, classroom behavior has improved with discipline referrals decreasing from 90 to 38 in just one year.

At another elementary school, the principal reports that twice as many of her students are also now reading on grade level compared to last year. The fifth graders improved more than 20 percentage points on the both the reading and math sections of the TAAS test. Discipline referrals at her school were down by 50%.

At the middle school, the eighth grade students' test results are up. The scores for passing all portions of the TAAS are up more than 26 percentage points from last year. More than 90 percent of the students passed the reading and math sections. The overall passing rate is the highest in the district's history and exceeds the 1994 rate by 53 percentage points.

At the high school level, 90% of the students passed the TAAS exit reading test, 91% of the students passed the TAAS exit math test, and 94% passed the TAAS exit writing test. The passage rate exceeds last years' results by 12% in reading, 5% in math, and 10% in writing. This year's results clearly demonstrate major improvements from 1994 when fewer than 61% passed the reading, 46% passed the math, and 63% passed the writing portions of the TAAS exit tests.

Attendance at parent workshops at both elementary schools has more than doubled. The middle school and the high school also reported much

more parental involvement in school activities. Attendance at open houses was up by more than 50 percent. Parents were enthusiastic about coming to parent workshops, and some who went to the MegaSkills training sessions are now Parent Teacher Organization leaders.

## **Qualitative Results: The Voices of Parents, Students, and School Staff**

Although the evaluators found quantitative data to illustrate the improvement of this school district, numbers do not adequately capture the powerful behind-the-scene stories of this rural school district in the Rio Grande Valley of Texas. There is much to learn from the rarely heard voices of the parents, students, and school staff of this small school district. These are the stories that an outside evaluation team heard when they visited the school.

### **Parent Voices**

This program is such a good idea, since we can start with them at a young age and it will help them in the future. It's very rewarding and I would advise every parent who has time—no, to make time—and participate. I would advise it.

My oldest son has mild mental retardation, but with this program, it puts everybody on an even plane. He's able to participate in a lot of the activities they do. There was a direct impact on his self-esteem. If you develop one of the MegaSkills®, it carries over into others. When he did face a lot of obstacles in the classroom or playground, he was able to look at it from a different perspective. MegaSkills® expanded his mind.

MegaSkills® has allowed him to compete at a different level, mainly with himself. I've got five kids, and they're all at different grades and abilities, but MegaSkills® is something we can talk about together.

MegaSkills® has given us all a common vocabulary that makes us feel included at school when the teachers are talking about the MegaSkills, and we are talking about them at home.

The difference at home is that all my kids are now able to share and have a conversation on something they are all doing.

MegaSkills® helps the youth and it is a good idea for parents. My children and I communicate better.

For me, I have more confidence in myself as a parent and as a person. I am surer of myself. I am grateful to this program. It has helped my children and me.

First, it was hard for my children to understand that responsibility was important in their life, so this made them change because now they know it's important for them to do this for their part. So, it's made a difference, yes, it has changed my children's attitudes and behaviors.

MegaSkills® helped a lot, especially with my older girl. We used to have problems with her following directions. We'd ask her to go get something from on top of something and she would be looking all over. Now, we learned how to make it a game and she is doing much better.

I used to nag because they didn't want to do their homework. Now, first they do their homework, be responsible, take a little time, then the rest of the evening is free for them. So the next day, they will be confident because they have their homework.

## Student Voices

MegaSkills® is good for students. We are willing to work together; there is a lot of caring.

When you go out there fishing, you have to use responsibility to take care of the boats and your family members. You have to be careful about what you are doing, and that's a lot of responsibility [MegaSkill®]. You are on your own when you are out in the boats.

Focus is an important MegaSkill® because you need it so you can graduate and do well in your work and go on to college.

In baseball you have to focus [MegaSkill®] on the target you are pitching to—you have to throw it right into the catcher's glove.

The words are up on the posters and the teachers talk about them all the time. We even did MegaSkills® at Pep Rallies. Our parents were talking about them, too. They were everywhere.

MegaSkills® can help you in things like applying for college because it helps you have motivation to do your best.

In football, we had to use the MegaSkill® of teamwork to make a touchdown and to work together with the team to do our best.

They [MegaSkills®] make you a better person, a better citizen. They help you know the right things to do so you can have a better future.

The MegaSkills® help me at home. I show responsibility by taking care of my little brother and making sure he is okay.

## School Voices

MegaSkills® has done wonders for us. We've had a huge drop in discipline referrals. And most of the referrals were minor things compared to last year.

Success for All and MegaSkills® work well together. A lot of the parents told us they were going home and putting what they'd learned into practice. These two programs coming together had a big impact on getting the parents to school.

We had a second grader that started out the school year with a lot of problems. He lived in a little trailer house smaller than this room and his dad is in prison. This boy was very angry and was always causing problems, really out of control at times. If someone would take his pencil, he would take it back by force. We would have to remove him from classroom at times. He was in danger of being retained. The counselor, home room teacher, and principal started to work with him with MegaSkills®, and he started to feel better about himself, feel confident, feel part of the team. He had a much better semester and his grades started to go up. He really improved.

There was definitely a drop in the number of violent referrals for discipline. We had no fights from October on this year. I think MegaSkills® had a lot to do with that. We had some other programs working too, and MegaSkills® works well with our Peer Assisted Leadership (PAL) program. The work on MegaSkills®, conflict resolution, and mediation was definitely a help.

MegaSkills gives a common language and acts like a catalyst to other programs. They use the MegaSkills® words in mediation—words like responsibility and motivation. We're looking at Career MegaSkills® for next year.

I think the program is excellent. I know that it's something that every year you have to build on—you can't expect miracles right away, but I've seen some good things from it.

MegaSkills® has been incorporated into so many of our district programs, and I think that's what makes it even more effective. It has been implemented at every grade level across the whole district, and it works well with all kinds of other reading, tutoring, and school improvement programs. What MegaSkills® does is really neat; it's really great. They are very simple topics, very easy to talk about, and can be incorporated into many subjects. It makes other resources easier to use.

The MegaSkills® are empowering because these are the skills the students need to be able to be successful, whether they are

in school, in a job, or as a member of a family.

The community agencies are now using MegaSkills®. Head Start was using the parent MegaSkills® program, and the Council on Alcohol and Drug Abuse did something really neat during Spring Break—they did the ropes activity for all the juniors and seniors and they talked about caring, cooperation, and teamwork. The kids did just wonderful with the MegaSkills®. Not only could they talk about what they had learned, but they were also demonstrating it.

I saw a big change in the English as second language students because of MegaSkills®. Usually they are very unsure of themselves. MegaSkills® helped them become part of the student body. They ran for office in student council and had increased participation in school activities.

## Summary of Voices

Parents, students, and school staff feel like the district is very supportive of their efforts to improve home-school communication. The district provides space, equipment, food, and materials for the workshops and student activities. At one school there is a classroom assigned to parent activities. Other schools use their auditoriums or schedule vacant rooms on an as needed basis. Parents who participate are recognized during Public School Week, and there have been newsletter and newspaper articles about MegaSkills®. The district has also offered the MegaSkills training to community service providers such as Head Start, child protective services, probation, and alcohol/drug prevention programs. The district is pleased about the enthusiasm of these service providers and wants to continue this effort.

The staff believes that the MegaSkills program enriches their ongoing reform efforts. The elementary schools are particularly pleased about how well MegaSkills® complements Success for All. One teacher said that Success for All encourages parent participation and requires twenty minutes of reading a day with parents and children and MegaSkills® enriches and extends that time because it gives additional tools for home-school communication. She noted that the MegaSkills® materials were very organized and easy-to-use.

Parents report that MegaSkills® has increased home-school communication because they now have a common vocabulary with teachers and their children. Parents believe that MegaSkills® has improved the climate of school.

Several who said they hesitated before to go to school now say that they feel welcome at school and have the confidence to ask teachers questions and to attend school functions. The parents report that their children are now more cooperative and take responsibility for their actions. They like having a focal point for their discussions with their children. One parent said that the program helped her personally make the decision to go back to college. She felt she gained confidence and motivation from the workshops and wanted to be a model for her children. This parent was actively involved and made posters for all over the school, and now is acting on what she learned from MegaSkills®.

## Implications and Recommendations

In this case study, an effective home-school program increased academic achievement and attendance in a low-income, Mexican-American community. The approach was a combined effort of parents, teachers, and the community; it was not just a school staff initiated program. Teachers, parents, and students selected the program, tailored it their own community, and used it as a tool to focus their school reform efforts. Although the research on the effectiveness of MegaSkills® is ongoing in this school and other schools along the Texas-Mexico border and more results need to be documented with larger sample sizes and comparison schools before generalizations beyond this case can be made, the beginning lessons may be helpful to those developing similar programs.

Parents, students, and school personnel were very enthusiastic about how far they had come, and they wanted more time with this home-school program, particularly more workshops for both teachers and parents. Several common themes emerged from both the quantitative and qualitative data that help us understand why this particular home-school program worked. The students, parents, and staff felt that MegaSkills®:

- is a catalyst for getting things accomplished
- is a tool to link parents, teachers, and students
- provides a common language for communication
- helps students be better citizens
- helps parents be better parents
- helps teachers be better teachers
- improves school climate
- improves discipline
- increases student achievement

School personnel have ideas they want to share with other districts about

how to do things even better than they did this year. Some of these recommendations include: identifying specific MegaSkills® for each month, assigning specific courses/classes to teach specific MegaSkills® at middle school and high school (e.g. history classes to teach perseverance); designating the meeting dates for the parent meetings early in the year; holding ongoing district meetings for professionals to share ideas about MegaSkills®; establishing parent centers at every school; having regular training (refresher) courses; continuing to work with service providers (child welfare, probation, etc.) regarding how they can work with the school and parents on MegaSkills®; helping all teachers on every campus be aware of the program; introducing the program to all families; and targeting specific high risk families.

The school district is enthusiastic about this parental involvement program and has done an outstanding job of implementing it. This was a grassroots community effort; everyone was involved and committed to improving education. The school district was not wealthy; in fact, the district's financial investment was approximately \$25,000 to cover the initial training and materials. The activities for teachers, parents, and students were low-cost or no-cost. What this program provided was a tool, a universal language, for bringing the district together on an issue important for all the stakeholders. This program acted as a catalyst that worked well with other programs and provided the momentum to initiate dialogue and action.

The short-term outcomes are positive, and one can extrapolate some possible long-term outcomes from the strong, positive research literature on family involvement in education. There is a plethora of research studies about the benefits of parental involvement in education. Anne Henderson and Nancy Berla (1995) in *The Family is Critical to Student Achievement* provide evidence from more than sixty studies in two categories (studies that evaluate the effects of programs or interventions and studies that look at family process). Their conclusion is that the evidence is beyond dispute. In accord with the work of Bronfenbrenner (1974), Chavkin (1993), Clark (1983), Comer (1983), Dornbusch and Ritter (1988), Epstein (1995, 1996), Kagan (1985), and Walberg (1984), they state incontrovertibly that when parental involvement in education occurs, children do better at school and in life. They conclude that the most accurate predictor of a student's achievement is not income or social status but how much a family is able to be involved in their child's education, create a home environment that supports learning, and express high expectations for their children's education.

When parents are involved in their children's education, not only does student achievement in elementary and secondary school rise, but also college admission rates are enhanced. Students gain improved self-esteem and better parent-child relationships, teachers gain confidence in their ability to teach students, and administrators gain positive community relations (Reyes, Scribner, & Paredes Scribner, 1999). The voices of this small, rural Texas-

Mexico border school have a clear message for other schools that a home-school program such as MegaSkills® can make a difference. The students, parents, and school staff were truly empowered to improve their school.

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