

Creating Successful School-Based Partnership Programs with Families of Special Needs Students

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Abstract

In order for schools to provide students with disabilities, and indeed all students, with the support they need to thrive in school, they must assist and support families in becoming actively involved in their children's learning. Yet, little has been written about the special needs and concerns of families of students with disabilities, and the strategies that schools can use to effectively partner with them. This paper draws upon interviews with Action Teams for School, Family and Community Partnerships, which include administrators, teachers, social workers, and parents at two special needs schools in the National Network of Partnership Schools. The interviews were conducted to uncover issues that schools should consider when developing comprehensive partnership programs that meet the needs of students with disabilities and their families.

Introduction

The importance of families' involvement in their children's learning is well established. Indeed, most educational reform programs include a family involvement component because of the overwhelming body of research that indicates that students' families are crucial to their social and intellec-

tual growth and development (Comer, 1984; Durkin, 1984; Epstein, 1995; Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1995; Sanders, 1998). Schools traditionally have been more successful in involving some parents more than others. Calabrese (1987) found that schools were often alienating places for poor, minority families. Similarly, studies in the U.S. and abroad show that socioeconomic status influences the level of involvement families have in their children's schooling (Lareau, 1989; Sanders & Epstein, 1998). Parents of adolescents also report less family involvement than the parents of younger students (Dornbusch & Ritter, 1988; Eccles & Harold, 1993), and parents of high achieving students report more involvement than parents of lower achieving students (Sanders, Epstein & Connors, 1999). An additional population of parents who may be overlooked when partnership activities are conceived and implemented are the parents of students with disabilities.

The importance of involving families in the education of students with disabilities is well documented. Research has shown that students with disabilities whose parents are involved in their education are more successful than similar students whose parents are not involved (Turnball & Turnball, 1990; Turnball, Turnball, Shank, & Leal, 1995). It also is established that the earlier this involvement takes place, the greater the benefits for the child and the family (Anastasiow, 1986). Yet despite this research, many schools have failed to actively involve the families of special needs students in the education of their children (Gallegos & Medina, 1995; Hornby, 1995; Hornby & Murray, 1987). The Individuals with Disabilities Act (IDEA) of 1990 provides parents the rights to examine their children's records, challenge school evaluations, make formal complaints, and pursue due process hearings. But these rights center on procedure not partnership (Smith, 1998). Aside from the information gathered at mandatory Admissions, Review, and Dismissal (ARD) meetings, the families of many special needs children are often left on their own to figure out how to best support their children as individuals and as learners as they proceed through school (Harry, 1992; Turnball & Turnball, 1990).

For example, in a study of fathers' involvement in their children's special education program, League & Ford (1996) found that many fathers lack the necessary information and feedback from schools to become more actively involved in their children's learning. Fathers in the study reported that information from the school was often sporadic and unclear. They also complained that they were not supported in becoming involved in varied ways in their children's learning at school or at home. These fathers had suggestions for ways that the school could encourage greater father, and ultimately, greater family involvement. However, the fathers did not feel as though they had a vehicle to express their concerns or to offer suggestions.

Schools can foster supportive relationships with the families of special needs students, and move parent involvement beyond procedure to partner-

ship (Gallegos & Medina, 1995; Stainback & Stainback, 1996). Hornby (1995) and Sommerstein & Wessels (1996) argue that the degree of success that a school experiences in its efforts to do so has a great deal to do with the attitudes, practices, and policy of the school and its staff. According to Hornby, a good school policy:

. . . needs to be clear about parents' rights to participate in various aspects of school life. It needs to embody the idea of a working relationship based on equality of value of contributions from parents and teachers. This involves acknowledging the different responsibilities but shared accountability of both parents and teachers within a working alliance formed on behalf of children (p. 15).

Some schools that have traditionally worked with special needs students and families have a wealth of experience developing the policies, attitudes, and practices that Hornby describes. To examine these processes, this study analyzes qualitative data from two special needs schools that have used an action team approach and Epstein's framework of six types of involvement to develop school, family, and community partnership programs that promote students' well-being and success (Epstein, 1995; Epstein, Salinas, Coates, Sanders & Simon, 1997). In so doing, the study provides researchers, educators, and families at other special needs schools and schools moving toward inclusion with information and insights that can be used to understand and develop structures that support diverse student populations and their families.

Setting and Methods

The data in this paper were collected during the spring of 1998. All data were qualitative and collected to provide insights into the partnership practices of two urban schools, Dr. Lillie M. Jackson and Lois T. Murray, that serve students with special needs and their families.

The Schools

The schools in this study were selected based on recommendations from two of the Facilitators for School, Family and Community Partnerships in the Baltimore City Public School System (BCPSS), and school presentations at the district's end-of-year workshops on school, family, and community partnerships. These schools were identified as having excellent programs of partnership as defined by the National Network of Partnership Schools. Ac-

According to National Network standards, excellent partnership programs are those that include practices for six types of family and community involvement: parenting, communicating, volunteering, learning at home, decision making, and collaborating with community. The programs also must reach out to the families of all students, be implemented and evaluated by Action Teams for School, Family and Community Partnerships, consisting of parents, educators, and other members of the school staff and larger community, and be integrated into the total school program (see Sanders, 1999).

Both schools are citywide special education facilities that serve children in grades 1 through 8. The students are between the ages of 6 and 14, and experience one or more developmental disabilities, ranging from moderate to severe/profound, and include muscular dystrophy, Down's Syndrome, cerebral palsy, epilepsy, deafness, and blindness. Both schools have the capacity to serve approximately 95 students, but largely due to the district's move toward inclusion, both schools currently serve about 70 students. Although similar in many respects, each school has a unique history, program, and culture.

Dr. Lillie M. Jackson School is a one-story building located in a residential neighborhood in northwest Baltimore. The majority of the students are African-American (97.7 %). The number of children receiving free or reduced price meals is high at 97.1 %. All students are transported to and from school on one of five yellow school buses each day. There are 37 staff members assigned to work with the students, including fourteen certified teachers, some of whom work as team teachers. The school's philosophy toward educating students is clearly outlined in its mission, which states:

The mission of the Dr. Lillie M. Jackson School is to provide experiences and knowledge that will facilitate each student's growth. . . . Education is a partnership. The school staff, parents, and children all work together to ensure the best possible education for our students.

Lois T. Murray School is nestled in a residential and business community in northeast Baltimore. Boys and girls in grades 1 through 8 come to the school as a result of ARD screenings. Students who attend the school are those who need a small, structured environment. These students include those who are moderately to profoundly handicapped, hearing impaired, visually or orthopedically impaired, and multiple handicapped. The majority of the students are African-American (approximately 85%) and receive free and reduced price lunches (approximately 70%). The school has open classrooms, and an adult-student ratio of 1:4, including professional and support staff. The school's commitment to education is embodied in the

principal's statement to parents that was included in one of the school's monthly newsletters. It reads:

Educators and parents in all areas and at all levels are aware that involved parents result in higher achievement levels for our boys and girls. As a special educator, I firmly believe that the result of parent involvement is even more significant in the achievement of boys and girls with developmental delays. . . . Our goal is to keep parents informed about the education of our children.

Data collection

The data collected for this study included interviews, observations, and school documents. Using different data sources is recognized as central to good qualitative research in that it allows for data triangulation and more credible conclusions (Adler & Adler, 1994). The interviews, which totaled approximately four hours per school, were conducted with members of the Action Teams for School, Family and Community Partnerships at each of the schools. Members of these Action Teams had received training on how to develop partnership programs using Epstein's framework of six types of involvement (1995) and on the action team approach at workshops conducted annually in Baltimore.

The Action Team at Dr. Lillie M. Jackson consisted of eight members, six of whom were present for the interview: the principal, two teachers (one of whom was the Action Team chair), the school social worker, one parent, and one paraprofessional. Separate interviews with the teachers, the parent, and the school social worker also were conducted to further explore issues raised in the Team interview. The interviews were transcribed and coded for data analysis. The Action Team at Lois T. Murray School consisted of ten members: the principal; the assistant principal; three teachers, one of whom was the School Improvement Team chair and another the Action Team chair; a parent, who was also a paraprofessional at the school; another parent, who was the PTO president; and two grandparents who had grandchildren attending the school. In addition to an extensive interview with the entire Action Team at Lois T. Murray, separate interviews were conducted with the PTO president, the assistant principal, and the Action Team chairperson.

To supplement the interviews, school observations were made. This part of the study included observations of classrooms and other areas such as the cafeteria. Field notes were taken on student interactions with each other and adults, the presence and activities of volunteers, the physical layout of the buildings, and special school features, such as bulletin boards that high-

lighted volunteers, students, and teachers. Supporting materials also were collected, including school newsletters, mission statements, calendars of events, interactive homework exercises, parent surveys, and records of parent attendance at ARD and PTO meetings.

Data analysis

The interview data generated from the respondents were transcribed and coded using a software program, *Atlas.ti*, designed to help organize and analyze qualitative data. Data analysis was an iterative process, which consisted of examining all of the qualitative data for propositions, categories, patterns, connections, and themes (Schofield, 1989; Seidman, 1991). Revisiting the relevant research literature aided in the process by stimulating further analysis (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Three processes emerged as central to the schools' success in developing positive, comprehensive, and inclusive partnerships with their students' families. These processes—creating avenues for communication, opening doors for decision making, and promoting pathways for student progress—and the partnership practices used to support them, are described below.

Processes Promoting Partnerships

Creating avenues for communication

Communication between teachers and families can increase understanding and cooperation between the school and the home and show students that their teachers and parents are working together to help them succeed in school. Studies show, however, that families and schools rarely engage in personal communication. Using a national sample of families of eighth graders, Epstein and Lee (1995) report that most parents of eighth grade students never contact their children's schools about school performance (48%), academic programs (65%), or school behavior (71%). In the same study, nearly one-half (45%) of families report that schools never contact them about their children's school performance; two-thirds (65%) report that schools never contact them about their children's academic program; and 69 percent report that schools never contact them about their children's school behavior. Additionally, when schools do communicate with families or families with schools it is often in response to a behavioral or academic problem (Epstein & Connors, 1994). This negative communication between families and schools, in many cases, widens the gulf between home and school (Lightfoot, 1978). In contrast, when schools make an effort to regularly communicate with students and their families about school programs and students' progress,

negative attitudes decrease, and schools and families become better partners in education (Epstein, 1986; Mitchell, in press).

Communication was central to the partnership program at each school in the present study. This communication took several forms, including monthly newsletters, parent and faculty surveys, student notebooks, telephone calls, calendars, flyers, school meetings, and parent-teacher conferences. These school-home communications were knowledgeable, caring, and creative.

Knowledgeable communications. Interview data and school documents highlight the level of knowledge about students' educational needs and parents' concerns that the Action Team brought to the school communications it helped to develop and disseminate. This knowledge was comprehensive, in large part, due to diverse Action Team membership. Each of the Action Teams consisted of teacher and family representatives, as well as individuals with other roles in the school and community. The family representatives possessed and brought to the team an intimate knowledge and understanding of parental needs and concerns. The teachers brought a professional knowledge about child development and the educational needs of children with disabilities. The paraprofessionals on the teams brought knowledge of the classroom as well. This knowledge, in the case of Dr. Lillie M. Jackson School, was supplemented by the experience of the school's social worker, who is hearing impaired. She brought to the Team her personal and professional experience, as well as knowledge of some of the school's families that she gained through home visits and personal phone calls. The combined knowledge of parents, teachers, and others on the schools' Action Teams was used to develop school-home communications that provided families with information about the ARD process, inclusion, student transitions, and home activities to support students' learning and progress. These topics reflected parents' interests as revealed in family surveys that were administered by the schools.

Caring Communications. Beyond being knowledgeable, the schools' communications also reflected an ethic of caring. When discussing the importance of caring in schools, Lipsitz (1995) argues that "without caring, individual human beings cannot thrive." Chaskin and Rauner (1995) contend that caring is "an ethic that requires commitment and continuity. It is the continual expression of caring behaviors that develops the trusting relationships in which growth can occur" (p.674). Caring school communities, then, are sensitive to the needs and concerns of their students and families, and express this sensitivity through their words and actions.

Caring at Dr. Lillie M. Jackson and Lois T. Murray was, perhaps, best reflected in the content and dissemination of the communications that the schools provided their families. Whether verbally during school visits and ARD meetings, or in writing through memos and newsletters, school com-

munications reflected understanding and respect for families and students. At Dr. Lillie M. Jackson, the newsletter was written with large font and simple language that was free of jargon. These modifications occurred because the Action Team members found that some of their students' parents have disabilities. Because some of these parents were not the primary caretakers of their children, the school made certain that both the biological parents and the primary guardians were sent school communications. As one teacher and Action Team member explained:

For example, if a child lives with an aunt who is the primary care giver for that child, we send home two letters. Therefore, the mother gets her respect as a mom. She gets her correspondence, but the aunt gets the correspondence as well.

At Lois T. Murray, student notebooks also were illustrative of this ethic of caring. The notebooks were a school-wide form of daily communication. They evolved as more than just a way for teachers and parents to exchange information about student growth and progress. Teachers and parents also exchanged notes of appreciation and support, from which both benefited. When discussing the notebooks, a grandparent on the Action Team at Lois T. Murray School stated:

My daughter [the student's mother] is not able to come here to the school, but the teacher always puts a little note in the notebook. Then, she answers back to him. That's a good way to communicate with each other.

The school principal added:

I read comments in the booklets and the notes to parents, and I know that some parents must feel really good getting them. There are not only problems, but there are little things that teachers notice on a day to day basis about the children and their growth. . . . This morning a teacher showed me what a parent wrote in one of the student's notebooks. She wrote: "You are a very special person, and I am glad to have you as [my daughter's] teacher." That is a really good thing for a teacher to hear at the end of the year, or at any point during the year. It really fosters good relationships between school and home.

Creative communications. To ensure that they communicate with all families, the schools used creative ways to disseminate information. PTO meetings, for example, did not always rely on speakers or presentations, but included more creative avenues such as games and skits to relay information. At Lois T. Murray, the assistant principal, the PTO president, others on the Action Team, and the ARD manager organized a PTO meeting to help families better understand the ARD process. Games were used to help families decipher all the acronyms that are a part of special education but are unfamiliar to many families.

At Dr. Lillie M. Jackson, to ensure that families received information from the school, the Action Team solicited the assistance of the bus aide. Each school bus had an aide who helped to supervise students as they traveled to and from school. The aide knew each of the students and his or her parent(s) or primary guardian(s), and agreed to hand deliver newsletters, permission slips, and other important information from the school. This was a creative use of a school resource to make certain that all families received important school communications.

Dr. Lillie M. Jackson School also developed a system to document telephone calls that were made to families. The Action Team called the system, "Call a Home." The school designed a form that teachers used to record when they called families, and the reason(s) for the call. Teachers noted, for example, when parents said that they would not be able to attend monthly parent meetings so that the Action Team could better plan for the events. The forms also helped teachers to monitor their phone communications, to ensure that they made regular contact with all their students' families.

According to teachers, parents, and administrators on both schools' Action Teams, school-home communications helped the schools to develop stronger relations with their families. Family members at Lois T. Murray confirmed this perspective on surveys administered in February 1998. Families were asked to grade the school on a scale of A to F. More than three-quarters of the parents (76%) who completed the survey gave the school an A, a significant increase from 51% the previous year. Nearly all the parents surveyed reported that they felt welcome at school activities (96%) and that their children were happy at the school (96%). Communications that were knowledgeable, caring, and creative allowed these schools and families to build the mutual support that is a central ingredient for successful programs of school, family, and community partnerships (Sanders, 1999).

Opening Doors for Decision Making

The National Transition Alliance for Youth with Disabilities (NTA) emphasizes the need for families of students with disabilities to become involved in decisions about their children's schooling as early as possible (NTA,

1996). According to the NTA, when families of students with disabilities are involved in their children's education, student outcomes—specifically those that relate to students' transition from school to work—are greatly enhanced. However, studies on family involvement for students with disabilities report that schools underutilize family involvement, and many families are not encouraged to become active decision makers in their children's educational program (Harry, 1992; Turnball & Turnball, 1990). Schools in this study took several actions to reverse this trend.

Both schools designed several opportunities and vehicles for parents to take active roles in school decisions that affected their children. These opportunities ranged from deciding topics for parent meetings, to helping to assess the treatment needs of their children, to planning for student transitions. The schools encouraged active parental involvement in these decisions by soliciting parents' ideas and opinions, and by demystifying processes and structures in special education.

Soliciting parents' ideas and opinions. At each school, surveys were important. Whether administered in print form or via telephone, families were regularly and formally asked about their ideas and opinions. The information gathered in these surveys was used to organize parent meetings, refine student IEPs (Individual Education Plans), and plan school activities and events for students and families. At Dr. Lillie M. Jackson, for example, surveys were distributed at the beginning of the school year to identify parents' interests for monthly parent meetings. The topics that were identified by the greatest number of parents were covered that year. In the study year, the topic that received the most interest was inclusion. The school organized its first parent meeting around this topic and invited a district level official to address parents' questions and concerns.

At Lois T. Murray School, parents also were surveyed for their opinions, interests, and concerns. At the beginning of the school year, parents were surveyed about topics of interest for PTO meetings. The surveys helped the PTO president, with the assistance of the Action Team and others, to organize the meetings. As at Dr. Lillie M. Jackson, inclusion was one of the most requested topics. Parents also were interested in learning more about the ARD process, drug and alcohol abuse, speech therapy, SSI and social security benefits for children, and other topics that were covered in eight PTO meetings during the year. Parents also were asked to list the best time for PTO meetings. Previously meetings had been held during the day, but because a substantial number of parents responding to the school survey requested evening meetings, PTO meetings were alternated between days and evenings. The school also used grant money received from the state for partnership activities to provide meals at the PTO meetings, as well as bus tokens or taxi fare to families who needed assistance with transportation. School records indicate that average attendance at PTO meetings, while still low at

about 11 parents for a student population of 70, increased by 3% in one academic year, and two of the meetings had nearly twenty parents each in attendance. At both schools, information discussed at school meetings was summarized in the monthly newsletters for the families who could not attend. In so doing, the school met a key challenge that is a part of the National Network's strategy for developing comprehensive and inclusive programs of school, family, and community partnerships (Epstein, et. al., 1997).

Demystifying Structures and Processes in Special Education

There was ARD, IEP, MOIL, SPH, all these initials, and I know when I came in, I did not know what these things were. I was too intimidated to ask and I felt stupid. I felt that they knew what they were talking about, and why shouldn't I. And I felt stupid . . . I did not say word one (PTO Chairperson and Action Team member, Lois T. Murray School).

This quote illustrates how confusing the decision making process for families of students with disabilities can be. As a result, many of these families may not be as actively involved in decisions about their child's education as they would like or need to be. To ensure that parents have the knowledge and confidence they need to be active decision makers in their children's education, Action Teams at both schools have focused time and attention on demystifying for families structures and processes in special education.

As described earlier, Lois T. Murray School devoted an entire PTO meeting and used creative activities to help families understand the many acronyms used in special education, and the importance of family input in students' education, especially at the annual ARD meetings. The ARD meeting is required for all students with special needs in Baltimore City Public Schools. Parents are encouraged to come, but can give the school permission to conduct the meeting without them. At this meeting, the ARD manager, a school administrator, educators, and others discuss the educational needs of the student and plan a program of services to promote the child's intellectual and social development.

The assistant principal at Lois T. Murray, who helped to lead the PTO meeting on ARD, stated that the meeting was important because many families did not understand their rights. She observed, "They would attend ARD meetings, listen to others discuss their child and sign papers that they were instructed to sign." The PTO meeting at Lois T. Murray was designed to encourage families to ask questions and share concerns, and to allow educators and experienced families in the school to answer those questions, and to

provide additional information to help families new to the ARD process understand their role. The assistant principal stated that one of her main interests was to help families understand that if they did not agree with something included in a student's IEP, they had the right to appeal it. She explained:

A lot of parents will get really angry because they do not understand or because people are not explaining things to them so that they can understand. . . . Then the next year when their children go to their next class, some of them may not know how to or what to say to the next teacher about what was said at the ARD meeting. . . . The school cannot do it alone, the parents have to be involved not only in the school and in the ARD process, but also at home to reinforce what the child is learning. We have to have the parents' input to help us with their children's education.

Dr. Lillie M. Jackson School also took steps to help families understand structures and processes in special education so that they could become more involved in decisions about their children's education. Based on parents' requests, the school held a parent meeting on the ARD process to help parents better understand the importance of their input at the ARD meetings. The school's principal explained:

My comment [to the parents] was "This is more important than your child's birthday. This is more important than Christmas because we are going to decide the educational program for your child. If we make a decision that you don't agree with, you can appeal through due process." We tell them the person who handles appeals. We give them the person's name, and telephone number . . . so our parents leave here understanding, I hope, what their rights are, what the process is, and that they don't have to accept anything that they don't think is best for their child.

The schools' efforts paid off. Family attendance at ARD meetings increased at both schools during the 1997-98 school year. Lois T. Murray had a documented 15% increase. Action Team members also observed that parents asked more questions and more readily voiced concerns about their children's education, not only with school staff, but with educators and administrators throughout the district. The Action Team chairperson at Dr. Lillie M. Jackson School reported that parent turnout to the meeting on inclusion was high.

And although the guest speaker was a high-ranking district administrator, “parents were pretty vocal about their concerns.” A parent member of the Action Team at Lois T. Murray School said that she had learned a great deal about special education while her child attended the school, and the knowledge had given her the confidence she needed to become more active in the school as well as in the larger school district. By regularly asking for their opinions and concerns and taking the time to help families understand the processes and structures in special education, the schools empowered more families to become more involved in decisions about their children’s education. As one teacher at Dr. Lillie M. Jackson proudly stated, “We want parents to always remember that they have rights. They can speak up.”

Promoting Pathways for Student Progress

The third process that emerged as central to the schools’ success in developing comprehensive partnership programs was their focus on student progress. According to Epstein (1986), the form of involvement that families are most interested in is how they can help their children with learning at home. Indeed, research in the United States (Durkin, 1984; Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1995; Lee, 1984) and abroad (see Sanders & Epstein, 1998) has shown that when families get involved with students’ learning at home, students’ attitudes toward learning and school performance improve. Although some families are involved with their children’s learning and progress at home without assistance, most parents report that they could help more if the teachers guided them in what to do at home and helped them become more knowledgeable about their children’s needs (Epstein, 1986). This is a primary goal at both schools in the study.

Essentially, the two processes previously described—two-way communication between the home and the school, and parental involvement in decision making—were integrally linked to students’ intellectual and socio-emotional growth and development. Through newsletters, surveys, notebooks, home and school visits, and telephone calls, educators and parents were sharing information and making decisions about students’ progress and about what to do to promote that progress. At each school, parent, school, and community resources were mobilized to encourage multiple pathways for students’ progress.

Lois T. Murray implemented a number of partnership activities that were directly related to students’ development. At the school’s last PTO meeting for the school year, families and school staff gathered for a meal, and then each teacher went to a pre-assigned classroom. Parents first went to their children’s classroom teacher and the teacher described and demonstrated an activity that parents could perform with their children during the summer. The demonstration lasted 15 minutes, and parents were given the materials

that they would need to carry out the activity. Parents then attended a maximum of three other demonstrations conducted by classroom teachers, the home arts teacher, the speech therapist and others, to gather additional ideas on activities to conduct with their child during the summer months.

This was a culminating activity for the school, but throughout the year, families and communities were given the opportunity to help promote students' learning. The school had volunteers from a local university who tutored and mentored selected students under the supervision of the classroom teacher. These volunteers were showcased on the school's central bulletin board. The school also had a partnership with a charter school that served students in grades 1-8. Students from the charter school visited Lois T. Murray once a week or twice a month. They interacted with students on a number of classroom activities and art projects. A year prior to this study, students from both schools worked together to plant a vegetable garden for AIDS patients in Baltimore. Through this partnership, students at Lois T. Murray and the charter school were given the opportunity to develop and hone their social skills while learning about diversity, tolerance, and social responsibility.

Lois T. Murray also had a successful community-based learning program to help students master common daily skills. The School Improvement Team chair, who was also a member of the Action Team for Partnerships, stated that the program aimed to show the community members outside the school that "our children can be as independent as any students." The school selected seventeen topics on which they focused during the school year, including traffic safety, public transportation, grocery shopping, dining out, and clothes shopping. There were classroom activities as well as community-based activities for each topic. At the start of the year, parents were given a schedule of the seventeen units. During each PTO meeting, school staff gave families information on the content of the units being covered that month, and discussed the skills that would be taught during each unit. This information was also provided in the school newsletter for parents who could not attend the PTO meeting. Further, to ensure that all families were given the opportunity to participate, a week before each unit began teachers sent a letter home to parents describing the unit and some activities they could do with their child to reinforce the unit at home.

The units required students to take trips into the larger community to practice and demonstrate their newly acquired skills. Family members were asked to participate as helpers and chaperones. Some families rode on the school bus with their children in the morning in order to volunteer their time for the day. Parent volunteers were given evaluation sheets on which they answered simple questions about students' mastery of the targeted community-based skills.

Dr. Lillie M. Jackson School also used partnerships to help achieve one of

the school's five priorities—increased student achievement. The school's partnership with a local business was especially important. The business helped with the school's Thanksgiving and Christmas dinners for students, staff, families, and volunteers, and also collected supermarket register receipts, which the school redeemed for computer programs and special computer equipment for their students.

In addition to this school-community partnership, Dr. Lillie M. Jackson School had a life skills program. The school nurse led parent workshops on issues such as mobility and toileting. These workshops were designed to provide parents with information and activities that they could use at home to help students master these skills. The school also had an open door policy. Families were encouraged to come in and see what their children were working on at school so that they were better able to follow-up at home. Classroom teachers sent home a checklist of the tasks that students performed at school, and asked all families if the children were performing these tasks at home. When there were discrepancies, the teachers and parents discussed what could be done so that the children's progress was better supported in both the home and school. One teacher on the school's Action Team had a student whose parent reported that the child could not do any of the tasks that he was able to successfully perform at school. According to the teacher:

I asked her to come in and she not only came, she brought the [child's] aunt and the stepfather. I encouraged her to stay in the background. He [the student] did not know that she was anywhere in the building. . . . She observed him not only performing the self-help skills, she observed him playing and interacting with other children; she observed him choosing a toy. And when she came in, she apologized. And now, I know that she is doing more at home because I see a change in his behavior. She said, "I never knew that he could do this." Some of our parents need that encouragement. We tell them, "Never write your child off."

Each school was committed to students' progress and achievement, and realized that this was possible only through coordinated support from the school, families, and community. As one grandmother at Lois T. Murray School concluded, "You have to have a connection with the teachers, the school, and the community so that your child can be embraced fully. That's the only way to achieve progress."

Discussion and Conclusion

The success of these schools' programs of partnership tells us a great deal about creating such programs to address the needs and concerns of families of students with disabilities. First, these schools' successful programs emphasize the importance of positive and supportive attitudes. Second, they highlight the availability of expertise upon which schools can draw to develop appropriate partnership activities. Third, they show that the benefits of comprehensive partnership programs are shared by school staff, families, and students.

Attitude counts. The processes that these Action Teams engaged in to create successful partnership programs were possible because of the positive and supportive attitudes of the parents, educators, and others in the school community. Through their words and actions these individuals expressed patience, understanding, respect, and high expectations for each other and for the students. These attitudes facilitated positive communications with families and community members, created a climate for collaborative decision making, and promoted collective support of students' learning and progress.

When the Action Teams were asked what advice they would give to educators and parents seeking to create partnership programs for families of students with disabilities, both teams emphasized the importance of positive attitudes. A teacher at Dr. Lillie M. Jackson School offered this advice, "Be patient and not judgmental . . . and also help parents to feel comfortable with teachers and other staff." Another teacher on the school's Action Team added, "In a comprehensive school moving toward inclusion, the staff and others need to be open minded to the possibilities of all children, especially those with disabilities. Don't stick them in a mold and say what they will never be able to do. The staff needs to be open minded and sensitive to the students and the parents."

Expertise is available. Each school's Action Team for Partnerships was able to engage in the processes used to create successful partnerships with families and communities because of their collective expertise. Similarly, all schools can draw upon the expertise of parents, grandparents, educators, school social workers, nurses, community members, paraprofessionals, and others to develop partnership programs that build strong connections with the families of all students, including those with disabilities. By doing so, schools have access to individuals with diverse experiences and perspectives that can be used to identify and implement partnership activities to serve increasingly heterogeneous student populations.

The Action Team at Lois T. Murray emphasized the importance of tapping into the expertise of the families of students with disabilities, as well as teachers, administrators, and others with experience in the education of these

students. They contended that this expertise should be drawn upon at schools moving toward inclusion in order to educate faculty and staff, as well as other students and their families. Below is an exchange among three members of the school's Action Team as they discussed this topic:

Principal: One of the first pieces of advice that I would give would be to listen to the parents. . . . The parents here have a lot of information pertaining to their particular child's needs and they have good general information about services for people with disabilities. I think that any school that they went to would be depriving itself if it didn't involve these parents and listen to them and hear their suggestions for everything from instruction to supervision. . . . These parents have had lots of experience and they have a lot of expertise.

School Improvement Team Leader: I would also suggest that schools draw upon the expertise of parents and educators to have some in-depth staff development. There are some teachers [in comprehensive schools] who know nothing about children with disabilities. They need staff development so that they can be made aware of the characteristics of these children and become sensitive toward them. Without it, I see that it [inclusion] would be a hard transition for some children and their families—the staff needs to be informed.

PTO President: Parents and educators need to prepare students, too. We need to educate them about students with disabilities before these students come into the classroom. We need to educate everyone because it is a big transition for everyone, including staff members and children on both sides.

Principal: But that is one thing that bothers me, in this room we have really good people. No one has asked me anything about how you would carry out inclusion in the district. I have 35 years of experience in special education, and among the staff there is a lot of expertise. No one has asked us what we think or what we would do to help students successfully transition to comprehensive schools.

The benefits of partnerships are shared. Last, these schools' successful programs show us that when schools engage in the processes of creating avenues for communication, opening doors for decision making, and promoting pathways to students' progress, everyone benefits—schools, families, and students. Teachers have opportunities to hone their communication skills and tap into parents' knowledge about their children in order to better

encourage students' growth and development. The beneficial role of parental participation in student assessments has been documented in other studies (see Wolfendale, 1998). A number of studies also have documented the beneficial effects for parents when they are given the opportunity to become actively involved in their children's learning (Epstein, Simon & Salinas, 1997). In this study, parents of students with disabilities gained information and confidence to advocate more effectively for their children. Finally, students benefited from the many well-designed partnership activities focused on promoting student progress. One parent on the Action Team at Lois T. Murray observed that:

Before coming to this school, I didn't know how to work with my son. I didn't know what to do with him at the grocery store, and he was all over the store. Now he is able to push the cart. He has learned so much through the community-based program. He can go get the milk, the bread. He knows where different things are now in the store. I have learned how to help him with those skills.

Schools that aim to promote the educational success of their students can do so more successfully by devising structures and processes to make meaningful connections with the families of all students, including those with disabilities. This study suggests that developing these structures and processes is well worth the effort.

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