

Improving Parent Involvement Programs and Practice: A Qualitative Study of Parent Perceptions

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Recent major legislation – The Goals 2000: Educate America Act and the reauthorized Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) – has made parent involvement in their children’s education a national priority. School districts nationwide are being encouraged to reexamine their parent involvement policies and programs and to demonstrate innovative initiatives in order to obtain federal education dollars. Eligibility for Title I money is now contingent upon the development of school-family compacts in which families and schools declare their mutual responsibility for children’s learning. To receive ESEA money, at least 1% must be earmarked for parent involvement programs. Partnerships are to be forged between homes, schools, and communities with an unparalleled level of contact and communication between parents and educators (e.g., United States Department of Education, 1994). The challenge now is for parents, educators, employers, policy makers, and community leaders to make these partnerships work.

While most agree that parent involvement is a requisite for children’s school success (e.g., Epstein, 1985, 1995; Henderson & Berla, 1984), there is little consensus about what constitutes effective parent involvement. No one paradigm has emerged to dominate research and practice. Thus, confusion persists concerning the activities, goals, and desired outcomes of various parent involvement programs and practices. Moreover, parents have had surprisingly few opportunities to share their unique and valuable perspectives on what parent involvement means to them and what they need

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to make school-home partnerships work (however, see Kiley, 1995).

To address this issue, twelve Sections of the National Council of Jewish Women conducted focus groups with parents to hear from the “voices from the field” about parent involvement¹. The goal of this study was to build on and extend the growing foundation of theory and practice concerning strengthening school-home collaborative partnerships (e.g., Davies, 1994; Epstein, 1995; Moles, 1993a; 1993b). These focus groups were one of four activities of *Parents As School Partners*, NCJW’s volunteer research and action initiative exploring parent involvement to promote their children’s school success.²

Method

Focus groups was selected as the appropriate methodology to generate in-depth and rich information about the perceptions and experiences of parents. As the goal was to highlight as many different issues, opinions, and perspectives as possible rather than testing specific research hypotheses, making decisions, reaching consensus, or generating quantitative data, focus groups were perceived as the best fit between available methodological choices and project goals (Morgan & Kreuger, 1993).

Twelve NCJW Sections conducted parent focus groups. These Sections were diverse in size of membership and geography. NCJW volunteers received training through individual consultation, site visits, an in-depth how-to guide, a project newsletter, and ongoing intensive individualized technical assistance.

Sixteen focus groups were conducted. Parent participants were invited through random selection procedures. Response rates varied from 4% to 75%, averaging 15%. Each focus group was audio-taped and followed a similar format, including an introduction; signing of consent forms; opening, main, and summary questions; payment of subjects (\$20.00); and completion of a background information form. Questions addressed types of contact parents have with schools, the conditions under which certain types of contact occur, their beliefs about parent involvement, and their perceptions of the schools interest in and attitudes towards their involvement.

Sample

One hundred and eleven parents participated. Fifty-three (47.7%) were Caucasian, 46 (41.4%) were African-American, and 12 (10.8%) were from another minority, mostly Hispanic. Half of the parents had no more than a high school education while the other half had education beyond high school. Nearly half of the parents (47.7%) were unemployed (either not

working outside the home, volunteering outside the home, taking courses, or looking for work). Forty-five parents were employed full-time outside the home and the remaining thirteen parents (11.7%) were employed part-time. Seventy-two (65%) were married or in some other coupled relationship while thirty-nine (35%) were in single-parent families. One fifth (21.8%) claimed government assistance as their family's primary source of income and the remaining seventy-eight percent reported job wages.

Results and Discussion

The audio tapes of the sixteen parent focus groups were transcribed verbatim, totaling over 500 pages of transcriptions. The transcripts were read and submitted to a content analysis in which each unit (idea, sentence, paragraph) was grouped together with similar thoughts and ideas. The groups of ideas were then classified according to topic. This process resulted in the development of six categories, each with several subcategories.

These categories were partly based on the questions posed in the focus groups and partly based on other topics raised by the parents over the course of the focus group discussions. The focus group questions served as a starting place for the dialogue and were not strictly research questions.

How are Parents Involved?

Parents were involved in the schools in several different ways and levels, with some parents having little or no involvement and other parents being highly involved.³ No parent was involved in every way and most parents reported a range of involvement experiences:

I work in the classroom. My first grader, I go in every other week, one day. My third grader, I go in every Friday. I work in the library at Johnson two days a week and here one day a week. I cover in the office when they need somebody.

Being physically present at the school as a classroom volunteer, as a room mother, going on field trips, or assisting in the office and other areas of the schools, was a common type of involvement mentioned by these parents. Parents varied in the extent to which they wanted to be in their own child's classroom:

I prefer not to honestly work with the children directly when I can help it. I don't mind photocopying and I kind of avoid class mother and field trips.⁴

Another mother responded by saying:

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I volunteer when I can and I like the class trips. And I've been in the class to read them stories and anything else that they will allow me to do with a three-year-old behind me, is what I've been able to do.

The parents who volunteered in the class or in the building did so because they believed it was beneficial for the school and the children. They perceived that they were helping the teacher do her job better which ultimately benefited their child.

Parents also had contact and involvement in the school by attending parenting programs and activities at the school. Unlike volunteering in the classroom – which parents reported doing to help the school and their child – parents attended such programs to further their own skills and development. This type of involvement was mentioned least often.

In a few focus groups parents reported being actively involved in the PTA, listing many ways in which they were involved at the school, because of the PTA. Fixing up libraries, running food drives for poor families, planning and funding school trips, arranging for the school to obtain computers, planning teacher appreciation activities, funding prevention programs, and arranging for talent shows were just some of the PTA sponsored activities mentioned. Most of these activities were designed to enhance the quality of life at the school for the administration, teachers, parents, and children. These parents saw themselves as performing an important service to the school. It appeared as if parent/teacher associations and organizations were an important avenue for parents to become involved in the school. But, the PTA was not for everyone. Typical complaints among some parents who did not participate were that they felt as if they did not belong, that the PTA was a closed group or club in which new members were not welcomed. Difficulty attending evening meetings for parents with young children was another barrier to fuller involvement in the PTA. Among those who were involved in the PTA, there was frustration that a handful of people did all the work and a wish for more help and involvement from other parents. Clearly, there could be more communication among the PTA and parents not involved in it about how to make it a more inclusive experience. For those already involved, the PTA was one way to maintain involvement inside the school. Those who were involved seemed to stay involved over a several year period and seemed to take on roles of increasing responsibility.

Another form of contact with the schools mentioned by the focus group participants was parent-teacher communications (meetings, conferences, phone calls). These meetings took three primary forms, (1) specially arranged meetings to discuss a particular problem, (2) ongoing parent-

teacher communication regarding a child's progress, and (3) regularly scheduled parent-teacher conferences. These contacts were discussed by the parents:

I have two daughters. The oldest is in sixth grade. She stays in the behavior classroom for most of the day. My contact with the school on her is big. Very big. We have daily notes that come home in regards to homework and behavior. I have at least one phone call a week from the teacher or to the teacher in regards to problems, existing problems or new problems or old problems.

Other parents tried to maintain some form of ongoing contact in the absence of problems:

I periodically will call them or they will call me because I'm a very active mother and we need to communicate. I think my first [job] is to make sure that all teachers know I want them to communicate with me. . . so we have letters back and forth and phone calls.

Not all parents had such communication with the schools and some did not even attend regularly scheduled meetings. One parent, when asked if she attended any parent meetings, responded, "Not for me...They have 'em but I don't go."

One activity that seemed to bring many of the parents to the school were programs in which their own children performed. Plays, programs, band practice, and musical performances were activities that several parents mentioned as "must sees". Even those parents who did not attend PTA meetings or volunteer in the classroom made a special effort to be an audience member for their child's performances. Their child's excitement over these events and clear desire to have their parents in the audience was the added incentive parents needed to make the effort to come to the school. Social events geared for parents or the whole family such as open houses and pot luck dinners were also popular among some of the parents. They were seen as low key events in which they were not pressured to attend and which were purely social gatherings. Parents appreciated these opportunities to gather and socialize with other families in the school. The relatively low cost involved was an added incentive especially for parents with limited budgets. Several parents noted that the meals were "bargains" and "good deals". Again, transportation, having young children at home, being a single parent, and lack of time were barriers to fuller participation.

Unlike the school events, only a few parents mentioned participating in

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school committees such as curriculum reviews, staff evaluations, or school improvement. As one parent explained,

There's a budgetary advisory committee at every school that has parents on it. And we have a site based budget which just means that the money is given to the school. The committee decides do we want to get a computer for the media center or do we want to get this new English curriculum for first grade? They are in on that decision. . . . That's parent involvement to me. . . the day-to-day decisions that are going to affect your children.

Parents expressed interest in hearing more about these decision-making roles once it was brought up in the focus group. Some parents apparently had never heard of this option for involvement and were eager to learn more while others had known about the committees but did not know how to take the first step to become involved in them. (These findings are consistent with those reported by Blakely and Stearns (1986) and Chavkin and Williams (1993) that few parents serve in decision-making roles in school programs.)

Overseeing homework was also a popular topic of conversation among the mothers as there was considerable variation in how parents dealt with their children's homework (see Dauber & Epstein, 1993, for similar findings). Parents differed in the extent to which they structured their children's completion of homework with some being an active and involved "homework manager" while other parents allowed their children to decide for themselves if and when to do their homework. Some parents sat down with their children every day to jointly complete homework. These parents informed their children of incorrect answers and acted as a coach or "teacher at home". Other parents felt that their children needed to learn responsibility for themselves and that their children could do homework on their own. Most parents seemed to have an opinion on this issue and many felt insecure about whether theirs was the best approach. They worried that their input and assistance might be impeding their child's learning process. They did not know whether to give their children the right answers or to let them figure it out for themselves. They were unclear as to whether the purpose of homework was for the teacher to see if the child understood the work or for the child to perform well. In some cases parents felt that they should not have to work with their children if the teacher was doing her job properly. They interpreted working with their child at home as a sign that the teacher was abdicating her teaching responsibility. These were issues and questions with which these parents struggled and to which they did not have the answers. No parent mentioned discussing this issue with her

child's teacher nor that the school provided clear feedback and guidance as to the parent's role in the child's homework. Clearly, parents could benefit from more specific guidance from schools as to what is expected of them.⁵

A final form of contact with the school occurred in instances when the parent became involved in order to advocate on behalf of her child. For example, a parent with a physically handicapped child became involved in order to change the attitudes of the other children in the classroom:

My son had problems when he first came because the children knew that he was different so they kind of picked on him. . . . But I came immediately and let the teacher know what was going on with the children and I as his parent would not tolerate anything that interferes with his education.

Another parent became involved when she saw her son's grades dropping for no apparent reason:

My son last quarter dropped a grade almost in every class . . . I called up and requested a conference. Most of the teachers were like, "Well he is an honor roll student what are you here for?" And I said, "I think there is a problem. Every class something has happened so I don't want to miss something before it gets any further." And that is all it took. When he saw that I was there. . . that's all it took for him to straighten it right out. The grades went right back up. I think that just a little bit of communication between the teachers and I that straightened it right up.

A third parent told how she stepped in when she felt her son's teacher was making a mistake in her teaching strategy:

As a parent we have to step in. We have to talk to the teacher. . . I gave him a five minute math test and he was on problem nine and I said that he only has five minutes, move on. He said, "I can't move on. My teacher said not to skip." So I went up there and said maybe that's the problem. Maybe he didn't understand. And I talked to the teacher and she said, "Oh yes I don't have time to be grading his paper." I said, "You gave these kids 50 problems and five minutes to do it and you tell them don't skip if they don't know it?" "Well I don't have time to be checking all this work." I said, "Well

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don't time them. A timed test is to see how many you can do within a time period." I can see if you don't communicate with the teacher I wouldn't have known that.

Another parent shared her struggle to obtain appropriate services for her handicapped child:

I had to quote chapter and verse from the law and read it out and literally have the piece of legislation there because more than one time I contacted my legislator and said, "Can you send me a copy from the state?" And more than once I pulled it out in the meeting and said what the law reads.

In such instances, these parents felt that if they did not speak up for their child no one would. They felt it was their job as a parent to be their child's advocate within the school system. This was especially true when children were younger and were less able to speak up for themselves. It was also clear that parents were more likely to advocate for their children when they felt a wrong had been done to them. When they saw their child hurt by a teacher or not learning to their capacity because of something that was happening within the schools, parents rallied their efforts and took the school on. They believed that there was no one else to do this for them. If they did not take on the school the problem would go unaddressed. According to the parents, the teacher's role is to help all the children and no one speaks on behalf of their particular child but they as the parent. While most parents felt the school was responsible for teaching their child and that they did not have expertise in that arena, they did feel that as the parent they have a right and an obligation to question the school on behalf of their child.

Why do Parents Become Involved?

Parents shared their beliefs about the importance and value of being involved at the school and in their child's education in general. These beliefs were stated directly as well as implied in the stories they told about specific instances in which they became involved and the statements they made about how and why they were involved.

As discussed above, some parents become involved in order to address a problem between the school and their child. In these instances involvement was seen as a means to solving a problem rather than as an end in itself. One reason that parents felt so strongly that they could advocate for their children even though they were not educational professionals was that they felt that they were experts on their children. They knew their

children better than anyone else and had knowledge about their children that no one else had.

Parents felt that this “insider knowledge” of their children could be of use to the teachers, not just when there was a conflict but on an ongoing basis. Parents were frustrated that there was no formal mechanism for the teachers to obtain information from the parents about their child’s learning styles, interests, and talents. As one parent of a special needs child noted:

I think every special ed teacher should sit down with the mother and get the history of the child and strengths and weaknesses. The parent has the very knowledge the teacher needs. . . that when shared with those teachers, can make their job easier and give the children a better chance at success.

Many parents became involved and saw the value of their involvement as an ongoing collaboration between themselves and the school on behalf of their child:

The more we put into our school, the more the children get out of it. The better off we make it for the teachers, the happier they are. And the more they enjoy working with our children. . . And you want the teacher to feel appreciated because if it's a good teacher you want them to stay.

They perceived their involvement as making an important contribution to the school and thereby indirectly improving the quality of education their children would receive. Anything they could do to help the school would allow the teachers to spend more time teaching. These parents saw their jobs as freeing up the teacher by doing the tasks that took the teacher’s attention away from the children. Therefore, photocopying, errands to the office, taking lunch orders, and such were seen as important and worthy activities for a parent volunteer. For parents who did not see themselves as having a talent or interest in working directly with the children in the classroom, there were ways to be involved which could make a contribution to their child’s education. Parents recognized that schools have a limited budget and one way to channel more resources into the schools was through the effort and person power of the parents.

Some parents were involved in order to show their children that the family values education and views the school as an important part of the child’s life, “I want to show the kids that it’s important, that school’s very important to me. That’s why I want to be visible here and show them that it

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is just a really important place for them.”

In addition to seeing the benefits of their involvement at the school, some parents also felt it was important to be involved at home, seeing themselves as an equal partner in teaching the child outside of school. As one parent commented:

It's like half and half. We have to work together as a team as far as reading and school activities and things like that. So I guess it's like when they leave one school it's like coming home to another school.

Many parents recognized the potential influence they could have on their child's education and learning, exemplified in the following two comments:

Of course the teachers can't speak and be with every child at school because there is not enough time. In my opinion parents have to spend as much [time] as they can with children and help them because they begin from the family not from the school.

It's all in what you teach them at home because they only have your children. . . six hours a day. You have them the rest, weekends and everything.

What are the Barriers to Parent Involvement?

Parents were aware that they were not as involved as they could be or thought they should be. They talked wistfully about wanting to be more involved and feeling disappointed about the school events and field trips that they did not attend. Some also clearly felt guilty that they were not doing as much as other parents.

One set of barriers to parent involvement in the schools related to logistical constraints of time⁶, money, scheduling, transportation, and child care. Having younger children at home or working outside the home during the day made it difficult for some parents to volunteer in the school or to attend PTA meetings. While some parent teacher organizations offered child care during monthly meetings, none offered transportation. Several parents commented that while they were allowed to bring their children to the PTA meeting they did not feel comfortable doing so unless a separate space was provided for the children to play. Single parents or parents in a family where both parents work faced a challenge for attending school events let alone trying to be at the school on a regular basis for volunteering

or participating in the PTA. Many of these women had unpredictable schedules of rotating shift work as well as husbands with unpredictable work schedules: "I can't make it here hardly, because of work". One parent offered an interesting perspective in that she felt she needed to be home with her son in the evenings to help him with his homework. She chose to stay home with him rather than attend PTA meetings. Some parents' lives were so full with work and children, maintaining the house and going to school that involvement in their child's school sometimes took a back seat:

My problem is that usually I'm still so bombarded with paperwork that I forget to check with them and then I notice things after they happen. . . .One of my goals after I graduate next year. . . well one thing I've done is stop going to night school because I'm trying to work and go to school at the same time. . .so I can be there for him at night because that was really driving me crazy. . . so my goal next year, once I've graduated from school, I'm going to give more time to my children and get involved more with the school because they do have a lot of good things going on.

Another parent shared her difficulty:

I work a rotating shift. I work two jobs and to come to festivals and stuff, I have to request time off and then cover it with vacation. But I can't do that every time there's a meeting. I'm usually here and having to cover my job some other way when one of my kids is in trouble here, or sick. And so it is almost like I put that on the back burner. If one of my kids is performing or doing something in the festivals then I can make time for it.

Another logistical consideration a few parents mentioned was the lack of money to participate in some of the activities offered by the school. Book fairs, social events, bake sales, picture day all required a financial contribution from the family. Anger was expressed by some of the parents who felt that these events should not require additional money on the part of the parents, as not all parents could afford to participate.

A second common barrier to greater parent involvement was the relationship between parents and the schools (see Mannan & Blackwell, 1992, for similar results). Some parents had negative experiences being involved and felt that it would be better for their child if they stayed away. Other parents complained that they would like to be more involved but felt

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that the schools did not really want them to be, despite their claims to the contrary. As one parent explained:

As parents if you come to the teacher because you are concerned or you have a question or something, the initial reaction to you is that you are interfering. . . that I'm stepping on their toes and I should just mind my own business.

Another parent stated that as long as she was invited to come to the school she was welcomed and warmly received but if she came on her own initiative because of a problem or something she wanted to discuss then she did not feel welcome. Several parents complained that the school did not want to hear what they had to say about their child, the curriculum, or anything else. "They say they want to see parent involvement but a lot of times it's sort of like on their terms." Another parent complained, "You can come and cook the spaghetti for the spaghetti dinner. You can come and work in the clinic. But as far as sitting on a committee and being heard about curricular issues, it doesn't have that impact." Some parents even felt that the teachers did not welcome them into the classroom, "It's ok if you show up on a field trip but once you want to volunteer in a classroom some teachers have a problem with that and I don't understand why." Another parent stated that, "The teachers seem afraid of the parents."

Another common complaint that discouraged involvement was that the school always backed up the teacher in a dispute or complaint and did not give a fair hearing to the student or the parent. There was a sense of a closed system or united front in which the teacher and the principal did not want to hear anything negative about one of their own. "[If] something happens and you go meet with the assistant principal or principal, they are always going to take the side of the teacher." More than one parent told of conflicts with a teacher in which they felt that the teacher was either not doing her job well or was being rude or cruel to their child. In most cases the parent did not report feeling satisfied by attempts to address the issue. In some cases they felt that there had been negative repercussions from their attempts to advocate on behalf of their child. For example, one parent who was involved in an effort to have a teacher removed reported that her name was "mud" after that experience and that teachers made her son feel badly for having the mother who had gotten the teacher fired. After that experience she stayed away from the school in order not to make more trouble for her son. While this was an extreme example of a lack of positive outcome due to parent involvement, parents in general agreed that the school did not want them involved in school decision-making such as evaluations of teachers, input in curriculum, or allocation of resources. Parents felt that the school wanted their involvement in so far as it was convenient and helpful for the

school such as giving money to fund raising events and helping out on field trips. They did not feel that the school was responsive to their ideas about what involvement meant to them.

Another barrier parents discussed was one that emanated from their children and manifested itself in two ways. First, most parents reported that students lost information sent home from the school to the parent. Children were not perceived as adequate carriers of important documents between administration and home. As one parent sadly noted, "The communication tends to break down as the kids get older." Another parent agreed that kids, "... do not bring those notices home. They throw 'em out, they leave 'em in their locker, they crush 'em in their book bag." Another parent added, "And the kids don't give 'em to us. So something has went on and we don't know about it until it's over. And then the school thinks that we don't care. . .and then we think that they're not sending us notices, so it's a lack of communication back and forth."

Second, and possibly related to the above problem, was that many parents felt that their children – especially as they moved from elementary to middle and high school – did not want them involved in their school life. Parents felt that their children would be embarrassed to have them at school or on school trips. Quotes of such instances were abundant, "My son has kind of requested that if I'm going to help that I not do it on his team. So that's one rule we have." A second parent put it this way, "I have one daughter here in the 7th grade and I have the same problem. When she was in grade school, I was active but here she only wants me to bake her some goodies for the bake sale. Other than that, 'Oh Mommy stay in the background.'" Other parents added that not only do their children not want them at the school but they did not want parental input into their school related conflicts or their homework:

I found that as my son got into sixth grade, that he didn't really want me checking his homework any more. It seems when they get older they say, "I don't need your help anymore."

One mother told how her daughter had chosen to handle conflicts with teachers on her own rather than have her intervene, noting a shift in the amount and ways in which her child wanted her to be involved.

A final barrier mentioned by parents related to lack of information regarding school events and uncertainty among the parents about how to be involved. There was a sense that those parents who were already involved were closer to the school staff and knew about everything that was happening at the school. But parents who were new to the school or had not yet been involved did not know how to find out how to become involved. Parents seemed to feel uncertain or insecure about how and whom to approach to be involved. Again, the PTA seemed to be one way

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for parents to take on responsibilities and hear about what was happening at the school. But those who did not feel comfortable being in the PTA or could not attend because of time and other logistical considerations did not have another obvious route for initiating involvement. Some parents reported having called the school to offer their services either to the teacher or to the school and had not heard back.

What are the Facilitators of Involvement?

Parents also spoke positively about their involvement in their child's school, highlighting situations which made it easier for them to be involved. In one focus group in particular, the parents were overwhelmingly enthusiastic about how welcome they felt at the school:

Some schools don't expect it. You know they haven't had it for so long they don't even expect and they don't even want it. A lot of schools don't want parents involved. This school expects it and they want it.

You walk in and they're not looking at you like, "Why are you here?" They're looking at you like, "We're glad you're here."

It's a real open school for parents, you know. It's not just for the kids. It's for us too. So we can just walk in here at any time and pick up a pass, go into our kids room.

One parent spoke of the principal in the following way, "[He] is an excellent principal. He loves his children. He loves his parents, loves this school." It was clear from these parents that feeling welcome and comfortable in the school was an important facilitator of participation just as not feeling welcome was a barrier.

A related facilitator of involvement was schools offering services and programs for the parents. Examples included parents being able to use the school's computer and media room to work on their own projects, use of the copy machine, and adult education programs to further their personal development. All of these services created a sense of good will between the parents and the school as well as helped make the parents feel more comfortable being on the premises. Since it was noted earlier that parents who were around the school were more likely to know what was going on with their kids and more likely to know about other events, it was clear that anything that brought parents in the door might lead to more involvement, even if it was not related to their child's education.

Programs and services for children were also viewed positively by the parents. Anything the school did to make their lives easier or better was noted with appreciation. Breakfast and lunch programs for income-eligible children, morning and after-school programs for working parents, and extracurricular programs for all children were services that parents made use of and noted their appreciation of in their discussions.

A final facilitator was parents' belief that their children really wanted them to be around. "I think he likes to have me around. . . . They are just eating it up. And I am going to take every moment of it and spend it here." Another parent commented, "It's not even the parents as much as the children. The children just glow and just love it when their mom's here or their dad's here."

School-Home Communication

The nature and extent of school-home communications was a popular topic of discussion among the parents in all of the focus groups. Although it was a subcategory under the discussion of types of contact, it deserves a fuller discussion here as parents infer a lot about the extent to which the school wants parents to be involved by the ways in which the school reaches out to families and parents in the school community. Moreover, the extent to which parents feel that the communication is two-way, in which there are opportunities for them as parents to provide feedback and input into the school also shapes their involvement.

The primary mechanism for schools to communicate with the families reported by parents was newsletters produced either by the school administration or the PTA. These newsletters provide parents with information about upcoming school events, important information about schedule changes, and perhaps news of district events such as budget hearings. The newsletters were either monthly or weekly and were typically sent home through the children (in one case they were mailed – which was considered unusual by the rest of the participants in that focus group). Thus, they were susceptible to being lost, misplaced, crumpled, and mishandled by the children, a complaint about other types of school and classroom information transmitted by the children. In addition to these standard updates, schools sent home to the parents (through the children) important reminder notices. For the most part, parents felt positively about the school's attempts to inform them, "I couldn't get too much information from the school." While parents appreciated this ongoing communication, many felt swamped by the volume of the paperwork sent home. One parent jokingly complained that it was a full-time job simply managing the paperwork that came home every day from her three children. Several parents wondered if there was a more efficient means of the school's

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management of paperwork. Not one parent complained that the paperwork was difficult to read or not in their language of choice (either because of sampling bias or lack of comfort in discussing literacy problems).

Communication between the child's classroom teacher(s) and the home also occurred on a regular basis and was a popular topic of conversation among the parents. Some teachers, following the example of the school, issued a weekly or monthly classroom newsletter informing the parents of class events and class progress on various projects and activities. Again, these were one-way communications from the teacher to the parents. They did not provide specific information about any particular child; rather they were general informational notices about class level activities and events. While parents enjoyed these newsletters, they really wanted communication between the home and the school regarding their child's progress, especially when it was positive. Some parents did receive positive feedback from their child's teacher, events which were remembered fondly and with great appreciation:

I had an incident last year in second grade, three weeks into the school year and I got a phone call from this teacher. And it's like, "Hmmm, why is she calling me?" And she called to say, "I'm just telling you that you have a wonderful son." And it felt so good to get a call like that.

Most parents did not have such an experience, complaining that they only heard from the teacher or the school when there was a problem. They only heard the bad news and the complaints and not the good news and the appreciation. Parents were essentially grateful for any effort by the teacher to call or write the parent, be it positive or negative. Some teachers informed the parent at the end of every week about the child's missed assignments or problem areas that needed further work so that the parent could help the child. The child's homework and assignment books appeared to be the most common way for teachers and parents to have an ongoing dialogue about the child's progress and needs. Parents would write notes to the teacher if the child had an especially difficult time working on the homework and the teachers also used these books and papers as a vehicle for communicating with parents about the child's work habits and academic weaknesses:

And every week the child brings home his notebook and the parent signs off on it. And if there is any negative comment or a kid has done something that week in school like maybe my son might have been too much in class or my son might have played too much or my son may not have listened that

week, it would be in the notebook. I may be able to catch it on a weekly basis and to me that is good communication between the parent and the teacher.

As with everything else, there was variation in the extent to which parents were satisfied with these lines of communication. For some parents these back and forth notes between home and school were too negative and problem focused, too infrequent, and sometimes not responded to by the teacher, "Sometimes a parent will write a note and not get anything back from the teacher. So I think you need that communication going back and forth." Some parents perceived the school as only wanting to inform but not eager to hear back from the parents what they think. Also, parents noted that schools only send general information home and do not provide specific feedback and guidance to parents about their individual child. Those parents who picked their child up from the school used that time—however brief—as an opportunity to touch base with the teacher about the child's day.

In some schools parents and teachers talked on the phone in addition to the contact through the assignment and homework books:

I usually call the teacher, sometimes at home because by the time I get home school is closed. So I have their phone numbers at home and I usually call them up at home and ask them what's been going on in the classroom or what's been going on with my child.

Many parents reported wanting more personal and individualized contact with their child's teacher. The parents in the schools where the teachers did call were aware of the benefits of this contact and were aware of the special effort it took on the part of the teacher to make this happen,

And they'll let you know that your daughter's not doing what they expect of her. And then you should be glad that you have a teacher that will take the time to call you. And they call me and they let me know. And they will send a note home first and if you don't get that note they'll call you on the phone and say, "Well I sent a note home with your daughter."

Another issue on the topic of home-school communication was the desire for timely notification of problems. Many parents complained that they were not informed of problems until it was too late. From this, they inferred that the school did not really care about their child's success. Parents saw early notification as an opportunity to nip a problem in the bud, to help

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their child catch up before he or she gets too far behind, an opportunity to intervene before the problem becomes of crisis proportions. Parents, even those not typically involved, wanted the opportunity to intervene before it was too late. And because children did not always know when they were going to have a problem, the parents saw the schools as primarily responsible for informing the parents of emerging problems:

When a parent finds out that a student is failing, usually it's already too late. That parent should be notified, like, after the second failing test, "Hey, I think we might have a problem here."

Whereas here your child could have gotten in trouble and you'd not even know about it until maybe like the 10th time and then you find out about it and by then you know they're ready to kick your kid out.

Yeah, they're doing fine. They're doing fine. Then they come up with a D. You know. How fine were they doing when I talked to you?

The final topic raised in discussion of home-school communication was the parent-teacher conferences scheduled by the school to provide the parent with progress information regarding their child's social and academic performance. These conferences were offered usually twice a year in the fall and spring and appeared to last around 15 minutes. Most parents felt that this was not enough time to have a meaningful discussion with the teacher, although they recognized that the teachers had many conferences to conduct.

How do Parents Want Schools to be Different?

The final question in the focus group asked parents to pretend that they could change any aspect of how the school related to them. Participants broke into small groups, discussed the topic, and selected three ways in which they would like schools to be different. Even though the question was specifically focused on how schools related to them, the parents' wish lists included several suggestions that did not specifically address the quality of the interaction between schools and homes. The parents made suggestions of how they wanted the schools in general to be different. The first three categories of more services, more communication, and better and safer facilities were the most popular choices across all of the focus groups. None of the other suggestions received the same degree of consensus.

Many parents mentioned a desire for the schools to offer children and

parents more services and programs. A nurse on staff was a popular request among parents, especially those with special needs children who have ongoing medical conditions which the school was not trained or equipped to handle. Some parents told stories of their children being sent home because of a nose bleed because no one on staff was able to tend to the child. One parent worried that she would lose her job because of the frequency with which the school called her to pick up her child during the school day for what appeared to her to be minor medical incidents. Parents would prefer if there was someone on staff who could deal with medical incidents on-site should they arise. In that way children could resume the school day once they felt better rather than being sent home.

Another service parents called for was the building being open past school hours to be used as a community resource center for tutoring or special educational programs. More computers per child and more updated technology were concerns for parents who worried that their children were being left behind. Offering extracurricular activities either on school time or after school were popular suggestions such as sports programs, boy and girl scouts, and music lessons. Some parents also wanted more support services for their children, be it gifted programs, mental health counseling, or summer school for children who needed academic assistance.

The second area of improvement was in the type and extent of the communication between parents and schools (see Pryor, 1994). Parents wanted to be informed if homework was missing so that it did not become a problem. Parents wanted to know if their child was not performing well before the report card or progress report indicated a problem. Parents wanted to know when their child was not behaving well or doing well in school:

I felt they went too long. She started at the beginning getting A's in Math and slowly started slipping and then I got the slip when she slipped!

If possible, parents would like to hear good things about their children's performance and behavior, not just the problems – what one parent called, "Happy Calls".

In addition to progress reports, parents wanted to know what was going to be taught over the course of the year so that they could have the opportunity to supplement their child's learning at school with at-home activities. They wanted to know what was expected of their child so that they could monitor progress and ensure more continuity between home and school. Ideally, that would go both ways in which the schools would hear from the parents what they expected their children to learn, but at a minimum, a way for parents to find out in advance what would be taught over the course of the year.

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Another form of communication that parents wished for was personal contact with their child's teacher. "We need a weekly meeting with parents and teachers and everybody can get together and try to solve these problems." Another parent voiced the same wish, "Communication. That the assignment books are utilized every week or daily faxes or some way for communication on a real regular basis, but regular personal contact. Like meeting with teachers once a week or something." A third parent added, "A PAL program for teachers and parents if they got together at the end of the week. You sit around, you talk. I know we are dreaming here because these are things that are probably never going to happen, but it would be nice if they could." E-mail, homework hotlines, beepers, faxes, evening phone calls, and telephones installed in the classroom were all suggestions parents had for increasing the accessibility of the teachers to the parents. Parents were frustrated that teachers could not be reached during school hours because they were in class and they could not be reached after school hours because the building was closed, "We need the teachers' and aides' phone numbers because it's a problem trying to track them down. We would like to have their home phone numbers." Other than those parents who volunteered in the class and the times when parents came in for their 15 minute conference, parents had very little face-to-face contact with their child's teacher, or any personalized individual contact regarding their child:

I know that's very difficult to do but if the teachers would have time set aside in their schedules to call parents once every three weeks, maybe six weeks. So that would be built in to the teacher requirements for their life and their job then they would have time to do it and I think they would want to do it.

Safety and school maintenance was a third popular issue among the parents. There was no dispute; these parents wanted their children to be well cared for when they sent them off to school. Parents of younger children dealt with feelings of loss when their little ones went off to schools that seemed so big and anonymous. Parents wanted their children to be protected and nurtured as much as they wanted them taught and educated. Parents of older children had different concerns around safety. They were concerned about the "bad elements" that other children brought into the schools – be it drugs, guns, sex, or violence.

Complete safety for all the children. They'd make sure that the school was always a safe haven for the kids.
There should be a guard in every bathroom.

Criminals should be ousted from the building permanently.

I don't want my child to see guns and I don't want her to see drugs and I don't want her to see violence.

Every day these parents gave their children over to the school, usually a school that they did not choose. Most of these parents could not afford to send their children to private schools and most lived in districts where they could not choose which school their children attended. Thus, this was a situation in which they had relatively little control. At a minimum they wanted the school building to be well maintained and they wanted their children to come home at the end of the day no worse off than when they left for school in the morning. For some of these parents, even this wish did not come true. Every day their children were exposed to things in schools that they would rather them not see and were forced to handle situations for which they might not be ready. In their absence parents wanted schools to protect their children and keep them from harm, and schools could not always do this, especially as the children got older and were more likely to bring in their own negative experiences from their own homes and lives. Parents of middle school and high school students were the most worried about undue influences on their children as they struggled with the reality that their children were out there in the world, away from their protection.

This desire for the school to nurture and protect their children came out clearly when parents spoke of their wish for the school to interact differently with their children. In this category of responses, parents focused on the emotional content of the relationship between teachers and children and they expressed a desire for the teachers to care about their children, to love them and treat them with respect and concern.

The teacher needs to make numerous positive comments, especially individual comments because even though they are in middle school they still have little baby hearts, they have not matured enough yet.

It's like... more love, it's a way to show love. That's what I'm saying, show more appreciation for the child.

We want everyone to know everyone's names like all the staff and faculty to know everyone's names, so that it would be like, "Hi Andrea, how are you?" you know, kids walk down the hall everyone on the security guards and everyone says, "Hi". You know it's like they're friendly and warm.

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Parents had this image of a warm, caring, nurturing, and supportive environment in which their children were loved and appreciated. This was what they wished for their children while they were away from home for the greater part of the day. A few parents extended this theme by calling for more flexibility on the part of the school when disciplining children. The parents wanted the children disciplined with respect and with an eye towards promoting positive values not in a punitive or harsh manner in which the rule was more important than the student.

Another area in which the school could be different, according to some parents, was to be more welcoming and more "family friendly." Parents, too, wanted to be respected and treated as a valued person when they made contact with the school. They did not want to feel as if they were a nuisance and a bother but rather as someone who had something important to say. One parent told of a school secretary who became blatantly annoyed at her when she called to let them know that her daughter would be absent from school. Parents wanted to be able to come to the school any time, not just open house and parent-teacher conferences, they wanted to feel welcomed in the building. "As parents we need to be able to just walk in, you know and a teacher cannot tell us you can't come. You know it's an open thing. It's up to you as a parent." Another parent in the same group followed up by saying, "I want to be able to come in, not interrupt the class but you know to make sure that he's doing ok, everything's ok and I can really see how he's doing. For him I just want the doors to still be open, you know, no matter what grade he's in."

Parents wanted the teachers to individualize instruction, to pay more attention to the children who needed extra help, to provide more challenges for the children who were functioning at the top, and to be open to children's own unique way of learning. Parents wanted more flexibility in what the teachers expected of their children and more attention from the teacher to help their children perform at their maximum potential. As one parent described the ideal situation:

Make sure that each child can get as much attention as possible using your parent volunteers and your assistants and any other adult volunteers that you have coming in.

Parents wanted teachers to monitor each child's progress and to allocate resources to whichever children needed them in order to make sure that each child mastered the material.

It's similar to learning up to his or her potential. The teacher

should recognize that your child needs more work and provide that for your child. I have a daughter who struggles so hard for just the homework she has. But your child who's much brighter, a teacher should somehow be able to differentiate and give more to the child that needs that extra challenge.

Parents also wanted the opportunity to provide input into teacher evaluations. This idea was a natural extension of the stories parents told of uncaring or incompetent teachers protected by the school administration. Parents wanted a voice in the process of evaluating teachers and wanted teachers to be accountable not just to the school system but also to the families with whom they worked:

We were looking for something along the lines of teacher accountability. Too often from the time our children are in grade school or middle school, you come in and present a problem and the principal says, "Oh I know. We've got that frequently with that teacher. There's nothing we can do." There is a feeling on the part of the administration that they don't really have a lot of control over teachers. There is the union and things like that. If you have a bad teacher you can't get rid of, you just maybe move them to a school where the parents don't think to file. But there is not the accountability so I think we would love to see that.

Parents also wanted their children to be able to provide feedback about the teachers, the school, and the work that they are doing. "I feel that the feedback from the kids is missing now from all education systems." Parents believed that allowing children to provide input and feedback into their own education process would increase their motivation to learn and would provide them with greater self-esteem as they realized that they were respected and valued by the administration. "It would be really fun to see what would happen if we started letting the kids make decisions also about what it is they wanted to learn."

Several other wishes were expressed by only a few parents and were not commonly endorsed. For example, parents in a few focus groups put on their wish list a return to more traditional schools in which children wore uniforms and said prayers. Other less common wishes included higher salaries for teachers, more integration across the schools in a district, more training for teachers, more community involvement, more principal involvement at the classroom level, and less social stratification within a school. Parents of special needs children had a separate set of concerns

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relating to more training from the teachers in dealing with their children, higher expectations among the district for their children, and more vocational education programs.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Parents have had surprisingly little input into the national debate on parental involvement. There have been few opportunities for parents to meaningfully express their beliefs and share their opinions and ideas about this issue. Policies, programs, and practices have been developed based on others' ideas of what parents want and what they need to be effective partners in their children's education.

The parents who participated in these 16 focus groups had strong feelings about the topic of parent involvement in their children's education. They shared instances when their involvement was a positive experience, and when their involvement was frustrating and disappointing. In the many situations when parent involvement was mandatory or clearly called for from the school, such as conferences, PTA meetings, school events, programs, and fund raisers, parents tried hard to accommodate the school schedule, even when it was a hardship. But there were also instances in which the parent was not invited but desired contact either to right a perceived wrong or increase contact between home and school. In these circumstances, not all parents felt welcome or comfortable, and many felt the school did not appreciate their initiative. Participation was not perceived to be a two-way partnership. Many parents felt guilty when they could not be involved in ways encouraged by the school and angry when the school was not receptive to their initiation of involvement.

These parent focus groups provide a first glimpse into what parents are really thinking and feeling, and the results offered fruitful avenues for refining practice to be more in line with the realities of parents' lives. Based on the focus group discussions, the following six recommendations are offered as ways that schools can respond to the concerns raised by the parents.

Be clear about how and why parents can be involved.

Many parents don't know how to initiate involvement in the schools. Opportunities for involvement in addition to participating in the PTA could be made available for parents. The potential benefits of different types of involvement could be clarified for parents so that they can be better informed consumers and more efficiently allocate their limited time and resources.

Build on parent involvement at school programs.

Many parents attend back to school night and school programs in which their children perform. Schools could build on these opportunities for involvement by making meaningful connections with parents at these times, by extending invitations for other types of involvement, and offering opportunities for dialogue between parents and school staff.

The same holds true for parental participation in services offered by the school for parents, such as use of school computers, adult education courses offered on-site, and so forth. Such services appear to generate good will and may be avenues for ongoing school-home contact and interactions.

Create more opportunities for input from parents.

Few parents serve on committees and have opportunities to be decision-makers in schools. In order to increase parent representation, schools could create more and different opportunities to allow parents to provide their input. For example, schools could periodically survey parents about their perceptions of the school, how welcoming it is, ways to improve school-home communication, etc. Schools could also work with outside partners to conduct focus groups to learn about parents' thoughts, feelings, and experiences. Such activities would generate positive feelings among parents and would also provide valuable insight into ways that schools could be improved.

Provide parents with specific guidance about how to oversee homework and suggestions throughout the year for supporting their children's learning.

Many parents are unclear as to how much and in what ways to oversee their children's homework. Specifically, parents would like to know whether or not and in what ways to correct homework mistakes. Specific guidance on this issue would be perceived very positively by many parents. Such interactions would also enhance parent-teacher relationships.

Inform parents of behavioral and academic problems in a timely fashion.

Many parents feel that schools wait too long before notifying them of problems, which they perceive as a lack of caring on the school's and teacher's part. Clarity as to school policy on this issue would be welcome by parents.

Provide parents with positive feedback about their children.

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Most school-home communication that is individualized is negative. Few parents receive any positive feedback about their children except at the brief and infrequent parent-teacher conferences, and maybe not even then. Schools could encourage teachers to provide positive feedback to parents at least once a year.

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Notes

- ¹ Focus groups were also conducted with teachers and principals, the results of which are presented elsewhere.

- ² Other activities included surveys of school district superintendents regarding parent involvement policies and practice, a critical review of the research literature, and a compilation of replicable programs.
- ³ There are probably parents who are even less involved than those in the focus groups due to self selection into the project. Findings should be interpreted in that light.
- ⁴ Based on pilot data collected for this project, this finding was not altogether surprising as some of those parents remarked that their children had difficulty attending to the teacher when they were in the classroom. Some children became angry when the parent took on a teacher's aide role and assisted other children rather than solely attending to them. Some parents felt they and their child needed more preparation for what volunteering in the class would entail.
- ⁵ Parents might also benefit from being informed about recent research on effective homework practices (e.g., Clark, 1993).
- ⁶ Kiley (1985) also found time to be a barrier to greater involvement.

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