

## Rallying the Troops

*Sam Redding*

Five leading researchers of family-school-community partnerships convened a session at the annual convention of the American Educational Research Association in Montreal last month (April, 2005) to throw a lifeline to scholars and practitioners in this field. The age of gold-standard research is upon us, and coin of that specie is rare in family-school-community partnerships. In fact, as the paucity of entries on the Department of Education's "What Works Clearinghouse" website indicates, rigorous evaluation of programs, curricula, and methodologies is scarce throughout the realm of education. For the field of school-home relationships, inadequate evidence of the effects of replicable interventions is a catastrophic deficiency; resources for personnel, programs, *and* evaluation will be drained away.

If the research base for effective teaching practices in mathematics is weak, resources for program design and evaluation will be channeled in that direction. But "parent involvement" is not seen as a core purpose of schooling. Rather than applying the new standards of evidence to more focused program design and greater commitment of resources, parental involvement is likely to be cast aside. The point is not to pit curriculum and instruction against parent involvement, but to realize the importance of both and the special vulnerability of the latter. So the stakes are high in what Heather Weiss, Joyce Epstein, Kathleen Hoover-Dempsey, Anne Henderson, and William Jeynes proposed in Montreal.

Their proposal to reinvigorate the study and practice of school-home relations by giving it greater research standing centers on four sets of questions:

1. Can we change parenting behaviors? If so, which ones should we change?
2. How do we understand the transformation of schools to make parental involvement integral?
3. How can teachers and schools be supported in encouraging parental involvement? What is needed in pre-service preparation of teachers? In-service professional development?
4. How do we educate “community-organizing parents” in what we know to improve families, schools, and communities?

Without answering the first question, we have no power to move on to the other three. The question itself is refreshingly blunt. It strikes at the heart of our frustrations, and by “our” I mean both educators and family advocates. When educators huddle amongst themselves, disappointed, disgruntled, and besieged, they vent their frustration on the deficiencies and intractability of parents. As one superintendent put it, “There simply is no consumer demand for parental involvement. Parents are not lined up at our door asking for help. Our efforts are exhausted simply trying to get their attention, hoping they will show up. The ones most in need of help never do.” On the flip side, when family advocates assemble, they speak of “breaking down barriers,” meaning the very schoolhouse doors at which the educators find no queues of parents seeking partnership. This Gordian knot will be broken when we can answer with certainty the question about changing parenting behaviors in ways that will enhance children’s learning. The other three questions are moot until the first is answered. They are the “how to,” procedural corollaries to the central question of knowing “what” is worth doing.

The fourth question, “educating community-organizing parents,” is asked with exasperation at attempts to change school systems and mentalities. Educating community-organizing parents holds great promise and considerable dangers. Parents would be reached directly and helped to both change parenting practices that will benefit their children and engage their schools in ways that will improve the schools and make them more attuned to productive partnerships. That is good. The danger lies in a misinterpretation of “educating community-organizing parents.” Well-intentioned organizations can end up causing more harm than good if their purposes are not clearly outlined. The sterling triangle of teacher-student-parent should not be overshadowed. Those in any community who would help schools and parents must know what they are doing, and the essential community is the one most intimately concerned about *particular* children—those in their daily lives. Despite the clamor for community groups to come to the aid of schools, enthusiasm could

easily outpace research and exhaust resources, energies, and hope. Again, the precision of the panel's question must be respected: How do we educate *community-organizing parents* in what we know to improve *their* families, schools, and communities?

Fourteen years ago, *The School Community Journal* set its maiden issue to print. Patricia Gándara supplied the fledgling journal with a guiding quote: "There is no better place to create a community of caring than in our schools—the heart of our future." Simple phrases are nicely put together in that statement. We would create community in our schools. Not *the* schools, but *our* schools. A "community of caring," not found naturally, not parachuted from heaven for us to enjoy, but "created" in a place by us. "Heart of our future" might be read past quickly as a throw-away cliché, so similar it sounds to the jingoistic mottos schools took up when they did what the management gurus told them to do and developed mission statements, all of which sounded blandly alike. But the word "heart" gives Gándara's phrasing just the right feel in this context. Of course, children are the future, as those of us of advancing age grudgingly acknowledge and as every pro-education politician and quasi-utopian charity cheerfully proclaims. Gándara, however, calls schools *themselves* the heart of our future, and "heart" in this sense echoes her notion of a community of *caring*.

Our schools, then, become islands of caring as the future rushes ever more swiftly upon us. Ideally, schools provide a place where children are safe, cared for, loved even—and, oh yes, taught. Our journal sought to amplify the central purpose of school—teaching and learning. While the ideal of a "community of caring" is itself appealing, the community of the school must also attend to a solemn duty, an irreplaceable purpose: to *care* enough to see that all children master the mountains of knowledge and acquire the vast array of skills that make it possible to meet the onrushing future as captains of their destiny.

The word "community" can prove mischievous. To be safe, caring, and purposeful, a school must also be, in many ways, insular and focused. Those most intimately attached to a specific school—its teachers, staff, students, and parents—are most capable of fostering an atmosphere of care, and they, in fact, constitute what this journal meant by the constituents of a school community. But a school carries a dual responsibility; it must respond to the hopes and dreams of its internal community while also preparing its students for the polis beyond, a larger world that supports its mission and expects results in return. With learning standards, we have struck a workable bargain. The ability of the school to meet its central obligation to *teach* is given a metric so that its results can be known.

Because many schools languished in want of an objective measure of their effectiveness, and because even admirable communities of caring could lose sight of the absolute necessity that each child—through hard work and competent instruction—achieve fundamental levels of mastery, a tablet of learning standards was bestowed. Caring and hard work, community and competence, go hand in hand in our walk to the promised land of success for all children.

Along with standards came a heightened concern for measuring up, meeting the mark, and so we have become more discerning in making choices about schooling, cognizant now that our curriculum, our instructional strategies, our support programs, and, yes, our engagement of parents in their children's learning must all pass muster. Passing muster means contributing to students' mastery of standards-based objectives and their demonstration of that mastery on state assessments.

Those who labor in the vineyards of family-school-community partnerships were stunned by studies like that of Mattingly, Radmila, McKenzie, Rodriguez, and Kazar (2002) which found no evidence of a causal relationship between parent involvement programs and student achievement. Then we read more carefully. Their conclusion did not discredit parent involvement as an effective tool in improving student learning, but asserted that the evaluation of parent involvement programs has not been of sufficient rigor to make the case. Yes, we cried, but the same might be said of a hundred other areas of education, since scientific rigor has not been the hallmark of much of education research until recently. But in our cry, we knew that our field was more vulnerable than those closer to the curricular and instructional core of schooling. The vaguely defined "parental involvement" domain has been meagerly funded on the program side, and the proportion of evaluations of these programs that are of sufficient rigor is no smaller, perhaps, than in other areas. Which, to us, means we need to work harder, apply greater scrutiny to our work, and apply a new seriousness to our methodology. Otherwise, we may be cast aside because of an insufficiency of evidence that, in other areas, will be cause for greater commitment of resources, some of which will be cut from our flesh.

We rallied around Anne Henderson and Karen Mapp's (2002) synthesis of the research literature which found evidence that direct, curriculum-related outreach to parents, within a climate of trust, *is* effective in improving student learning, even though we had to admit that the available research literature was lacking in gold-standard luster. William Jeynes (2002) provided more subtle understandings of the importance of our work, finding that parental involvement most significantly contributes to student learning in communities where the natural reservoirs of social capital outside the school are shallowest and where expectations for children's educational success are most anemic.

In Illinois, ADI squeezed out a study of a comprehensive parent engagement program in 129 high-poverty schools (Redding, Langdon, Meyer, & Sheley, 2004; Redding, in press), showing significant gains on the state assessments in comparison with a statistical control group of multiple matches with schools with identical beginning scores. The results of implementation over a two-year period came just as state funding for the program was eliminated and 1,000 line items were whacked from the state budget in 2003. The lessons learned were threefold: (1) comprehensive parent engagement can make a difference even over a short period of time (two years); (2) the effects were greatest for the schools at the bottom half in terms of test scores, in comparison with their own matched control schools; and (3) a line item called “parental involvement” is the last to find its way into a state budget and the first to be cut in a budget crisis.

The program in Illinois was both comprehensive and standardized, focused largely on reading, and delivered with considerable assistance from project coordinators external to the schools. Its costs were modest (about \$6,000 per year per school for two years). The program’s skewed effects—greatest where schools were the lowest performing—testifies to what Patricia Edwards (2004) has been telling us: Parent engagement programs must be targeted to local need and have scope and sequence in their design. This does not mean that struggling schools are in the best position to design their programs. It means that we must know enough about the varying effects of particular interventions in particular school settings to make appropriate recommendations for their adoption. That requires research.

James Comer (2004), laudatory in his assessment of the intent of No Child Left Behind, praises its commitment to successful outcomes for all students, including each disaggregated group of them. He is less charitable about the means the act applies to the task. Disaggregating groups of students is one step toward full attention to each child. It amplifies Edwards’s contention that parent involvement must take into account the age and background of the children whose parents we seek to involve, as well as the capacities of the school. While our Illinois experience taught us that specific and benchmarked interventions with ample external support are fruitful in schools with limited organizational capacity, we also know that more flexible and locally-steered programs (held within the bounds of research-based practice) are more productive when the school’s organizational capacity is greater.

Kathleen Hoover-Dempsey (1997, 2005) is turning our movement into science, carefully linking theory to testable hypotheses, validating instruments, and leading us back to where some of us began—the psychological aspects of parent-child relationships, including the nurturing of self-efficacy, that are

most likely to open doors of understanding about the parenting behaviors that can be changed to improve student learning. Her findings, in line with those of Jeynes, zero in on the subtle communications between parents and their children that build in those children a sense of possibility and productive cause-effect attributions that lead to sustained effort in school. Can these parenting behaviors be changed? If so, how?

Joyce Epstein (2002, 2004, for example) meets us at every venue, as she has for a quarter century, giving practitioners research cover, practical guidance, and connection to the evolving intricacies of federal legislation and the webbed ecologies of state education systems. As always, she reminds us that despite our trepidations about the shifting sands of national priorities, our work lies always before us, and it is important work.

A common complaint in education is that a gulf lies between research and practice, and the complaint is voiced by both researchers and practitioners. Fortunately, Heather Weiss and the Harvard Family Research Project place sturdy stepping stones across that gulf. Their publications and website, along with their Family Involvement Network of Educators (FINE), have competently scoured the research literature and presented useful syntheses, synopses, and procedural tools at the disposal of practitioners. Their *Preparing Educators to Involve Families* (Weiss, Kreider, Lopez, & Chatman, 2005) provides one estimable answer to the question of how to prepare teachers and schools to encourage parental involvement. Looking around the room at the panel presentation at AERA, I was struck with the healthy, eclectic mix of researchers, practitioners, and the invaluable hybrids of the two that fill our ranks. Our strength as a movement lies here.

We know more now than we did 14 years ago, when *The School Community Journal* began as a vehicle for merging family-school partnership research and practice with what was then known as effective schools research. We still have much to learn. Keying in on the four questions posed by the panel at AERA will steady our wandering ways. Maybe it will also keep us from being thrown overboard in the race to improve student performance and the tendency to funnel resources exclusively to the narrow domains that have already received the lion's share of resources and evaluation yet have yielded less than we know our children deserve.

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**Author's Note:** Please notice the special "call for papers" on page 5 relating to the four sets of questions outlined in this essay.