

# Parental Involvement in Education: Possibilities and Limitations

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## Abstract

This article examines parental involvement in school affairs as a means to forge school-community partnership in education. Parental involvement is a complex matter. On the one hand, research indicates its positive impact upon student performance. Also parents who get involved in school programs and activities develop positive attitudes toward school personnel and mobilize support for school initiatives. On the other hand, there are some fundamental barriers to meaningful parental involvement. The focus of this article is to identify the barriers to parental involvement in education and the possible ways of overcoming these barriers.

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Substantial research in the last two decades has shown that when parents are involved in their children's education, the children perform better. Research also shows that when parents are active in a school or a program within a school, it results in improved relationships between home and school. Becher (1984), in her extensive review of the literature on parent involvement, has pointed out that involved parents develop more positive attitudes about school and school personnel, help gather support in the community for the programs, become more active in community affairs, develop increased self-confidence, and enroll in other educational programs.

At the same time, research indicates that there are very few opportunities to establish a meaningful relationship between school and parents. The

efforts of schools in involving the community have been criticized as merely ritualistic, rarely providing any real opportunity for substantive negotiation and constructive criticism.

There are very few opportunities for parents and teachers to come together for meaningful, substantive discussion. In fact, schools organize public, ritualistic occasions that do not allow for real contact, negotiation, or criticism between parents and teachers. Rather, they are institutionalized ways of establishing boundaries between insiders (teacher) and inter-loper (parents) under the guise of polite conversation and mature cooperation (Lightfoot 1978, 27).

There has been an increasing demand for greater public involvement in education. Today, parents' voices of dissatisfaction regarding the public education system are loud and frequent. In a 1992 OISE survey, involving a representative sample of 1000 adults, 18 years of age and older, over 80 percent of the Ontario respondents supported increased involvement of parents in the operation of local schools (Livingstone, Hart, and Daive 1993).

The purpose of this paper is to look at the issue of community involvement in education with respect to parents, focusing on parental involvement as an important link between school and the community. There are, in fact, several types of parental involvement: Parents, can participate as recipients, educators, non-institutional volunteers, decision makers and so on. In spite of the great importance attached to parental involvement, parents and schools face many barriers realizing this involvement. In particular, most barriers seem to revolve around parental involvement in school decision-making.

Schools have been blamed for being closed institutions and for not involving the community in decision making concerning school policies and programs. The mounting pressure has been for making schools more democratic and curriculum more relevant. The underlying assumption of this view is that greater community involvement will result in better education for students (Levin 1982). Cullingford (1984) describes the pressure as follows:

There are... two distinct pressures on the educational system that are today causing the relationship of home to school to be re-examined. One is the impact of microtechnology which is causing an underlying questioning about the role of schools and the ability to learn in individual units rather than classes. The other is the change in attitude towards what schools are for, expressed through greater emphasis on skills, and by the use of the word 'community' together with the rights of par-

ents to choose schools and sit on governing bodies (p. 113).

Research evidence indicates that the matter of parental involvement is much more complex than it appears. Parents show minimal interest in the existing school programs. Levin (1984) noticed that the level of community participation in the existing school programs is minimal. This lack of interest on the part of the community, according to Levin, can be attributed to a variety of factors such as differing views about the nature and purposes of involvement, lack of skills on the part of the participants to make meaningful contribution, or deliberate obstruction by the school system.

It appears that the widening gap between schools and community is a recent phenomenon. O'Callaghan (1993) points out that schools and parents have always been recognized as partners not only in the education of children but also in their socialization. In his view, it is only in the past few decades that the partnership between home and school has deteriorated. The contributing factors to this deterioration have been teacher demand for higher salaries, increased emphasis on parents' rights, and greater mutual blaming for the increasing academic and behavior problems of children. O'Callaghan illustrates that families blame schools for student drop out; educators blame divorced, single-parent, remarried, and two-careers families for disrespectful attitudes of the students; and community agencies and institutions like police, courts, recreational organizations and town vendors blame both the family and school for problems with the youth. O'Callaghan concludes that the standard, independent, primarily disconnected efforts made by family, school, or community are not working and are not likely to work.

## The Importance of Parental Involvement

A number of studies show that parental involvement in education has several positive effects on students' achievement, home-school and school-community relationship. For instance, Henderson (1989) documents dozens of major studies and programs which describe the importance of parental involvement in education. Some of the positive effects of parental involvement as demonstrated in these studies are: improved student cognitive performance, improved student behavior and attitudes toward school, improved school climate, and improved school-community relations. Henderson notes that:

The issue of parent involvement is much larger than improving reading and math scores. It is central to our democracy that parents and citizens participate in the governing of public institutions. It is also destructive to the family to shut

parents out of their children's experience in school. . . . Parent involvement is not a quick-fix; it is absolutely fundamental to a healthy system of public education. . . . We cannot look at the school and the home in isolation from one another; we must see how they interconnect with each other and the world at large (p. 9).

## **The Concept of Parental Involvement**

Jowett et al., (1988) have defined the term 'parental involvement,' as the phrase which encompasses a broad spectrum of activities which have a common theme of seeking to bring together in some way the separate domains of home and school. Wolfendale (1983) prefers the term 'parental participation.' She however uses the terms 'parental involvement' and 'parental participation' interchangeably. Parental involvement, according to Wolfendale is an umbrella term that describes all the models and types of liaison between parents, schools and other community institutions that provide for children. The concept of parental involvement is changing. Traditionally parents have been viewed and dealt with as clients, and only recently as partners. The client concept implies that parents are dependent on expert's opinions, passive recipient of services, in need of redirection and peripheral in decision-making.

On the other hand, the partner concept suggests that parents are active and central in decision-making and its implementation, have equal strengths and equivalent expertise, are reciprocal in contributing and receiving services, and share responsibility as well as accountability with the professionals (Wolfendale 1983). Having defined the phrase 'parental involvement' along with its conceptual view, it seems logical to proceed to explore the ways parents can be involved in education of their children.

### **Types of Parental Involvement**

A number of writers and researchers have attempted to categorize various types of parental involvement in education. Jackson et al., (1976) categorized parental involvement into five types: 1) parents as recipients and supporters, 2) parents as educators and learners, 3) parents as non-instructional volunteers, 4) parents as instructional volunteers, and 5) parents as decisions makers. Sloper and Cunningham (1991) have identified four levels of links between home and school. These levels are: 1) basic links like transmission of information through written communication and direct and indirect teacher-parent contacts, 2) parental participation in fundraising, involvement with the parent-teacher association or with the governing body of the school, 3) active involvement of parents in classroom activities of activities

which can be carried out at home, and 4) parent-professional partnership in that parents are actively involved in activities which relate to the child's activities in school, and in the planning of the curriculum. This partnership, according to them, is one of equality between parents and teachers, each contributing their own special knowledge and skills.

Bloom (1992) proposes a comprehensive categorization of the types of parental involvement. Parents, in her model, can play seven types of critical roles at three levels: The levels are: 1) involvement with their own child's education, 2) participation in school life, and 3) advocacy. The following summary exhibits parents' role at each level:

### *I. Involvement*

- Parent-as-spectator monitors child's progress, checks homework, reads school memos and report cards, and attends school-initiated meetings.
- Parent-as-teacher actively assists child with homework, establishes home instruction routines to augment or reinforce school curriculum, and periodically assesses child's progress.

### *II. Participation*

- Parent-as-accessory-volunteer helps out with field trips, provides nonclassroom support services, disseminates school information via newsletters and phone chains, and conducts fundraising activities.
- Parent-as-educational-volunteer serves as an aide to the teacher in the classroom, checks homework and other assignments, listens to children read, and provides remedial tutoring.
- Parent-as-employee works as a paid employee of the school in any of the above capacities.

### *III. Advocacy*

- Parent-as-decisionmaker/policymaker functions as an integral part of the administrative structure, participating as a voting member of school councils or steering committees, mobilizing other parents around specific issues, and serving as monitor of the changes that result.
- Parent-as-mover-and-shaker functions as an independent force to initiate, implement, and monitor basic changes in the school structure, on a local, district, or statewide level (p. 21).

## **Barriers to parental involvement**

Liontos (1991) points out that all children are at risk at some time or another. Common causes of this condition are the increasing divorce rate, growing number of single-parent families, families in which both parents work, as well as families experiencing high level of stress because of the very complexity of modern life. Many of the traditional methods of parental involvement do not work with at-risk parents. In order to go beyond the restrictive scope of parental involvement, many different hurdles need to be removed.

### **Parent's perception of barriers to parental involvement**

Research provides us with evidence that parents associate some of the barriers to themselves. For example, these may be attributed to health problems, economic differences between parents and teachers, and work responsibilities (Leitch et al. 1988). Liontos (1991) includes parents having feeling of inadequacy, failure, and poor self-worth, as well as negative experiences with schools as barriers. Liontos further suggests that parents with certain cultural backgrounds as well as many low-income parents consider schools as institutionalized authority, hence leaving the responsibility solely to the teachers to educate their children. Furthermore, many parents of cultural minority groups also face language barriers.

### **Teachers' perception of barriers to parental involvement**

Leitch and Tangri (1988) report that the major barriers which teachers cite are (1) parents' unrealistic expectations of the school's role, (2) large families, (3) parents' attitude that school isn't important enough to take time from work, (4) parents' inability to help with the school work, (5) parental jealousy of teachers' upward mobility, (6) apathy of long-time teachers and their lack of responsiveness to parents, (7) absence of activities to draw parents in, and (8) teachers' resentment or suspicion of parents who are involved.

### **Administrators' perception of barriers to parental involvement**

Research reveals that although administrators support the general idea of parental involvement, they consider parental involvement worthwhile only if it relates to their own children rather than to the broader issues related to the school at large. They do not support parental involvement in school policy decisions such as the hiring and firing of teachers and principals or in the determination of priorities for the school budget. They perceive a lack of training on the part of parents to make decisions as one of the barriers in involving parents in shared decision-making activities (Chavkin et al. 1987).

## The education system as a barrier

The school is a microcosm of the larger bureaucratic system. Schools share bureaucratic characteristics such as performing their functions through routines or standard operating procedures, trying to avoid uncertainty and seeking stable internal and external relationships, introducing change incrementally, and choosing a course of action where minimal risk is involved. In addition to these, Davies (1987) mentions some of the special characteristics of schools that inhibit parental involvement:

- The goals of schools as organizations are diffuse, multifaceted, and subject to widely varied interpretations. . . .
- The "technology" of achieving goals is fragmented with responsibilities divided among administrators, counselors, classroom teachers, teaching specialists, families, and the students themselves, and the connections between a particular activity and a particular desired goal are often uncertain.
- The informal norms of school organizations are particularly powerful. The norms and specialized language of teachers as a professional group are buttressed by teachers' training and by their professional associations and unions. One such norm is "professional autonomy" in decision making.
- The formal structure of schools is unique. The various levels of decision-making activity—federal, state, county, district, school, and classroom—operate relatively independently of one another, with limited coordination and control. As many have pointed out, public education is a loosely coupled system. This means that mandates from one level to another are never self-enforcing. . . (p. 159).

The most sensitive and explosive aspect of parental involvement seems to be parents' involvement in decision-making. This requires a major deviation from standard operating procedures and introduces a strong element of risk into the organization. The regular flow of decision making may be interrupted, and there is a risk that parents will achieve too much power or create conflict. Any activity beyond the current repertoire of school activities demands for training and experience on the part of teachers and administrators. It poses a threat to administrators' ability to manage change and also to teachers' professional autonomy. Thus, the tendency is to discourage parents' involvement in decision making.

Lutz and Merzet (1992) have alluded to another barrier to parental involvement caused by the system. In their perception, local school boards exist in a milieu of rules and recipes that tell them how to behave within a multitude of circumstances. They have a local policy book covering every

possible contingency. They belong to state and national associations that publish journals and conduct regular, systematic meetings and workshops to socialize and acculturate them into the "proper" way for individual members and boards, collectively, to behave. Furthermore, Lutz and Merzet are of the view that the majority of school boards behave in an elitist fashion. Elite school boards are those which as the trustees of, and separate from, the people they represent. In decision making, these boards try to reach consensus in the public meeting by a unanimous vote. In fact, such behavior is in line with the rules and prescriptions for behavior given to the school boards by the ministry or other hierarchy above them.

### **Some suggestions for overcoming barriers to parental involvement**

Although scholars and researchers seem to be unanimous with regard to the critical role parents can play in education, they have been floundering with regard to the structure that can support parental involvement as an effective resource for school improvement. Such a structure is inconceivable without removing the barriers that surround parental involvement. Literature reveals that researchers have identified various ways whereby the barriers to parental involvement could possibly be removed and better home-school relationship could be established. Some of these means are:

#### *1. Empowerment of parents*

The mandatory involvement of parents in education will empower them to be equal partners in decision making. At the same time such empowerment will require them to be equipped with the kind of knowledge and skills necessary for dealing with educational issues in broader terms. Davies (1987) suggests that to overcome the organizational resistance, new legal mandates concerning parental involvement are necessary.

#### *2. Administrators' support*

It goes without saying that parental involvement in education is inconceivable without the support of the administrators at the site and board levels. Chavkin and Williams (1987) have pointed out a number of ways whereby administrators can promote parental involvement in education. These include collaborating with parents to develop a clear statement about the goals of parental involvement; formalizing and documenting policies encouraging parental involvement by involving teachers and parents; participating in parental involvement training activities; ensuring that parents are involved at all levels of the educational system; establishing the framework for parental involvement programs in a sequential form; and making



available the appropriate kinds of resources for parental involvement efforts.

McAfee (1987) points out that administrators can help determine the type of school-family work most appropriate in each community and school. They can take the lead in developing and distributing effective home-school handbooks, newsletters, news briefs, and community public relations efforts in the languages most familiar to the parents.

### *3. Home-school interdependency*

Liontos (1991), focusing on involvement of at-risk families, identifies various ways for parental involvement. In his opinion, at-risk programs should be grounded in the understanding that school and families are jointly responsible and mutually dependent. Successful programs, he stresses, emphasize the strengths of parents and value them. They acknowledge that parents care about their children and help parents to identify what they are capable of doing and how to overcome obstacles. Successful programs also empower parents by asking them what they would be interested in. Thus working with their agendas first and training them to be part of their school's decision making groups would enhance their participation.

### *4. Awareness of current research on parental involvement*

McAfee (1987) asserts that administrators and policymakers need to be aware of current research that shows the positive benefits of working closely with families, and of the way school policies and attitudes may influence the school achievement of children.

### *5. Need for structure*

Lombana (1983) thinks that the best way to enhance parental involvement is to develop a structure for partnership. In his view, one hindrance to effective partnership has been the lack of such organized structure of a model from which to operate.

### *6. Reaching out to newcomers*

Lutz and Merz (1992) define newcomers as those groups which had previously felt powerless and underrepresented, including cultural minorities. They suggest that new relationships be built to meet the changing demands and shifting the power structure. They assert that leaders must develop ways of reaching out to these groups in the community to build lines of communication, because they bring beliefs and expectations about education from their previous communities that can have a major impact on schools.

### 7. *Other means*

Davies (1983), in his summary of the findings of the Institute of Responsive Education concerning various methods for citizen participation in the schools, has pointed out a number of strategies to involve parents in education. Davies' strategies include parent associations, individual parent consultation, individual service projects, individual learning contracts, back-to-school nights, school open house, class visits, parent resource rooms in schools or in teacher centers, parent training workshops and courses, student participation in community organizations and agencies, mandated parent advisory councils for categorical programs, and school advisory committees, councils, policy boards both district-wide and school site levels.

## Summary discussion

In order to restore the confidence of the community in education, there is a compelling need for greater community participation. This will not be possible without opening additional windows for community involvement at school site and board levels. Aronowitz and Giroux (1993) make a stern assertion that schools commit forms of symbolic violence when they deny the voices and legacies of the communities that give meaning to the students who inhabit their classes. They go on to say that schools need to return to their public function, that is making democracy work through the process of sharing power, providing a democratic vision and working collaboratively to create a multicultural and multiracial democracy.

Parental involvement in education is critical for two reasons. First, it has a positive impact upon children in terms of educational achievement as well as psychological and emotional development. Second, if parental participation is not a panacea for the souring relationship and increasing mutual mistrust between the community and education system, it is definitely one effective way of restoring mutual confidence, trust and creating a sense of interdependency between the two.

If home-school relations and communication need to be improved, if the community is to be a source of support and resource for schools, if schools need to be returned to their public function, and if academic achievement and school behavior of students need to be improved, then parental involvement in education is pivotal and needs serious attention of educators, administrators, and policy makers. But there are also impediments which are complex because increased parental involvement means risking teachers' professional autonomy and school leaders' undivided authority as well as testing out the administrators' capability of managing conflicts.

In spite of the barriers and the risk involved, the clear and compelling

evidence is that parental involvement in education at all levels is needed. New research can explore various possibilities regarding the shape this involvement should take in terms of a mandatory structure. The structure should empower the parents within defined parameters to make meaningful contribution on the one hand and guard against unnecessary intrusion and chaos on the other hand. Without a mandate, parental involvement will remain just a way of placating parents and taxpayers. Another potential area of research is to look into the possible ways and means of educating parents. It may be necessary to provide parents with sufficient knowledge and skills to prepare them to undertake responsibilities of parental involvement beyond their limited interest in their own children to broader issues influencing all children. Developing a plan to orient teachers, school leaders, and administrators to work with parents in partnership with confidence and team spirit rather than fear and mistrust is a third area of need.

The responsibility of education excludes none, on the contrary it includes everyone. Knitting of a sweater is a good metaphor to illustrate this notion. We can imagine the bulk of yarn being in the hands of both parents and professionals who knit the sweater. The design of the ultimate result depends on the choices the two parties collectively make which reflects the needs of those who will make use of it; namely, the students. The material not only reflects the needs of its user but also the values and climatic conditions of the total environment—the society. The yarn in this analogy represents the complex and interconnected relationships among the actors. If for any reason the yarn is cut in any part of the sweater, the whole process is unraveled, leading to total disintegration. Home, school and community are interdependent in creating an enabling environment for education and in shaping or reshaping the society. Parental involvement acts as the wool upon which depends the very existence of the fabric.

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