Minimal Parental Involvement

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Causes Underlying Minimal Parent Involvement in the Education of Their Children

A school institutes a program that requires students to have their homework assignments initialed by their parents. The subsequent rate of completion of homework assignments increases, coupled with an increase of other academic indicators for these students. Another school faces a severe budget shortfall resulting in the elimination of many part-time positions, including classroom aides. The school responds by enacting a program to recruit and train parents as classroom helpers and tutors. Teachers work with volunteer parents to reduce student work-group size in classrooms without the need for additional expenditures. A third school exists in an area of the city troubled by youth gang activity. School personnel, community leaders, parents, and students come together in the school building at periodic meetings to discuss problems and reduce tensions. This school enjoys a continuing reduction in both student absentee rate and the rate of gang-related activity in or near the school.

All of these imaginary schools share a common image of schools successfully involving parents in the process of public education. For nearly three decades researchers have studied the various ways in which parents become involved in the education of their children. From 1966 to 1980 (Henderson, 1981), then on through the 1980's (Henderson, 1987), the plurality of research has shown that schools that engage in parent involvement programs tend to see immediate and positive results from their efforts. In fact, almost no examples exist of school-sponsored parent involvement programs of any nature NOT succeeding in their intended goals.

Are educators so good at crafting and executing programs that they never

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fail? Is the situation so needy that any kind of involvement, regardless of its nature, will produce positive results? Or does the literature just not discuss (or, perhaps, report) attempts that are less than stellar? While any of these reasons might be true, a review of the research into parent involvement in public education is absolutely clear on one point. The past twenty years have shown an enormous number of different kinds and types of involvement programs in different schools all across the nation with virtually all apparently succeeding. Even accepting the position of drastic need as an explanation for the many programs' successes, these reports demonstrate that educators continue to "re-invent the wheel" each time they consider increasing the level of parent involvement.

This paper reports the results of an investigation into the status of parent involvement programs, asking the critical question of why so many different—yet apparently successful—programs exist. We begin by examining several of the rationales given in the literature for schools to engage in parent involvement programs. Many programs mention not only the results of their particular efforts, but also the orientations of the professionals in the schools towards their students' parents. A synthesis of this literature has led us to the development of a taxonomy of potential reasons for parent low- to non-involvement in public education. It will be our contention that schools need to develop a better understanding of the needs and situations (both social and economic) of their students' parents before developing programs to increase their education participation. It is through such an increased understanding that we believe parent involvement programs can become more focused. It is also our contention that, from recent experiences in three Chicago-area high schools, communications between the school and parents is the key to undertaking any parent involvement improvement program. These schools all demonstrated that parent involvement increases begin with the school reaching out to and talking with parents on a more frequent and effective basis.

Parent Involvement Programs

As mentioned previously, one kind of parent involvement occurs when a school institutes a program that requires parents to review their child's homework. Another kind of involvement takes place when a school invites parents to participate as volunteer classroom helpers. Both programs can be successful in achieving their different goals. Yet both programs make very different assumptions about the role of the school, the role of the parent, and appropriate ways for the two to interact. Understanding the issue of parent involvement, therefore, is not merely a matter of comprehending the simple intended and achieved results. One must also understand the

roles of the school, student, and parent, and ways in which the involvement program seeks to improve a particular relationship.

As an example, the first situation described above is aimed primarily at improving the relationship between the parent and the child. At the very minimum a parent engaged in this intervention will interact more frequently with his/her child regarding homework and school. In the second scenario, not only is the parent-child relationship improved, but also improved are the relationships between parents and schools. Henderson, expanding on Ira Gordon and William Breivogel (1976), classified these types of parent involvement programs as (1) attempts to improve the parent-child relationship, (2) attempts to integrate parents into the school program, and (3) attempts to build a strong relationship between the school, family, and larger community. These major themes, and others to be discussed, each contribute to the make-up of every particular parent involvement initiative.

Programs to Improve Student Academic Performance

One factor underlying an increase in student achievement is the level of importance parents put upon education (Hart, 1988). Hart found that involving parents leads to increased academic achievement for students at all educational and economic levels. It was found that children of low socio-economic status (SES) tend to score below average regardless of the level of parent involvement with education across SES levels. All children, however, regardless of their SES, benefit academically from increased parent involvement (Benson, 1984). Low SES children consistently tend to score lower than high SES children on tests of academic achievement. When parents become actively involved in their child's education, the academic improvement in the student is more dramatic for the low SES child, even though that child will still tend to test lower than their higher SES counterparts.

Eagle (1989) found that parent involvement during high school was solely responsible for increased achievement once social background factors were controlled. Eagle examined the data for the 1980 cohort of high school seniors in the High School and Beyond data set. Her primary interest was in determining the exact influence of the home environment on achievement and on enrollment in and completion of post-secondary education as predicted by the National Center for Education Statistics SES composite score. The composite was made up of five different variables: (1) mother's education, (2) father's education, (3) family income, (4) father's occupational status, and (5) the number of certain types of possessions found in the student's home. Additionally, five measures of home environment were examined. These measures were: (1) composition of the household, (2)

parental involvement during high school, (3) parents reading to the student during early childhood, (4) patterns of mother's employment, and (5) having a special place in the household for the student to study. In a multivariate analysis all effects except parental involvement exhibited non-statistically significant contribution to increased educational attainment. Like Hart, there was more than sufficient evidence to suggest an interaction between parental involvement, the various measures of SES and home environment, and academic achievement.

Coleman and Hoffer (1987) examined the relationship between schools and parents as it related to the disparity in student achievement as found in private, Catholic, and public high schools. Coleman and Hoffer asserted that the apparent differences in ability between public schools and private high schools may be due to selection on the part of the private school. Private schools have the ability to select an academically superior student body while the public schools cannot. However, Coleman and Hoffer found that Catholic high schools turn out students that are academically equal to, if not superior to, the private schools. From the data collected in their study they postulated that the success of the Catholic schools was due to their strong community ties and the willingness of their parents to become involved with their children's education.

Dornbusch's 1986 study detailed three distinct parenting styles: (1) authoritarian, (2) permissive, and (3) authoritative. The authoritarian style is characterized by rigid discipline and decidedly one-way communications, with only the parent's views being represented. Permissive parenting is typified by a parent with a laissez faire attitude. In this style, parents offer little guidance or goal setting and virtually no limitation on the child's behavior. In the third style, the authoritative parent sets and enforces limits on the child's behavior, defines expectations for success in school, and is open to feedback from the child. This style of parenting is not necessarily compromising, but rather allows for a two-way dialogue between parent and child.

Beyond the impact of parental styles on the student's decision to stay in school, Dornbusch found that the authoritarian and permissive orientations were related to lower student grade point averages while the authoritative style was related to higher G.P.A.s This research reinforces the importance of the parent-child relationship (as evidenced by parenting style), and the home-school link (as evidenced by the level of parental involvement).

Programs to Increase Student Attendance

Another benefit reported from involving parents is increased rates of student attendance. A program at one Iowa school involved

parents by asking them to help verify their child's attendance (Kube & Ratigan, 1991). An old school policy forgave absences that were later justified by parents. This policy had led to mountainous administrative tangles and recidivism. Under a new school policy students were allowed only ten absences from each class per semester. Parents were required to verify each of their child's absences. In addition, parents were informed of all absences and all absences were counted toward the ten per class per semester limit, regardless of whether they were later justified by parents. In this way parents were held responsible for the attendance practices of their children. In the first year absences decreased by 65% and truancies by 78%.

Programs to Decrease At-Risk Behaviors

Parent involvement has also been linked to reducing the drop-out rate of high school students. Rumberger, Ghatak, Poulos, Ritter, and Dornbusch (1990) identified several parent involvement factors explaining students' drop-out decisions. Their research surveyed 114 tenth, eleventh, and twelfth grade students at one California high school. These 114 students had been coded as drop-outs by their school on the California Basic Educational System (CBEDS) form. Students in the drop-out sample were matched on basic demographic data to similar students continuing in school. The study found that several parenting practices were positively correlated with the student's decision to drop out of school: (1) permissive parenting, (2) negative parental reactions to grades, (3) excessive adolescent autonomy, and (4) low overall parent involvement.

Schools have also involved parents in attempts to curb the incidence of drug and alcohol abuse. Klitzner (1990) conducted a large scale descriptive study of ten parent-led programs aimed at reducing drug and alcohol use. Factors such as the history of parent groups, structure and activities, the roles or group participants, and the perceptions of parents, youth, and community leaders regarding group effectiveness were all studied. At the time of this research (1990), parent-led groups were infrequent, typically involving only a handful of parents. In the communities where such groups arise, though, they are reported to be largely supported and frequently effective.

Programs Aimed at Decreasing Operating Costs

Involving parents in the process of public education can also lead to direct economic savings for the school. Schools may recover untold costs in remediation by utilizing available parents as aides and tutors instead

of hiring paid personnel. This can free limited resources for use in other programs and improvements otherwise restricted by available assets.

Dorothy Rich (1986) outlined the initiatives advocated by the Home and School Institute for involving parents at school. Among them, Rich calls for the need to assign educational responsibilities to parents as well as providing training to teachers so that they are better equipped to utilize parents and work with families. These initiatives, undertaken in different forms by many schools nationwide, involve parents in the education of children—both their own and others—while allowing the school significant economic savings.

Involving Non- or Low-English Speaking Families

Gifted, disadvantaged children of both Anglo and Hispanic parents have benefited from a summer institute focusing on a differentiated parent education curriculum (Strom, Johnson, & Strom, 1990). Because the gifted children of disadvantaged families are typically under-represented in research, Strom, et al. specifically selected gifted children from both Anglo and Hispanic disadvantaged families. The researchers then used parents' scores on the Parent as a Teacher Inventory (PAAT) to construct individual parent education plans. These plans focused on helping parents to improve in such areas as: (1) arranging for solitary play time, (2) teaching decision-making skills and allowing students to practice making individual decisions, and (3) developing a respectful attitude toward child participation in conversations with adults.

Lucas, Henze, and Donata (1990) cite several key features found to be effective at aiding the language minority student. Encouraging parents to emphasize education at home was often cited. Several ways to encourage parents ranged from hiring staff who could speak the parent's language and sponsoring on-campus ESL classes to early morning meetings and telephone contacts between parents and counselors. Numerous such efforts have been cited as successful in reducing the number of language minority drop-outs at the schools where the interventions were attempted (Pell & Ramirez, 1990).

Many Kinds of Programs

The literature is replete with programs that have been very effective at increasing parental involvement with schools. In Tennessee, Donald Lueder (1989) implemented a family math program to help parents and student develop problem-solving skills. Harlene Galen (1991) details a program to involve parents from such low levels as no involvement to a high end result of parents helping in the classroom, trained by the teacher. This

continuum of increasing involvement is accomplished through the teacher inviting progressive levels of involvement from parents, then guiding and nurturing that involvement.

Interventions as straight forward as a parent-school contract (Kennedy, 1991) have been used to increase parent attendance at parent-teacher conferences as well as guaranteeing parent instruction in and use of computers. Such an educational contract has also been used to facilitate parent involvement in lieu of lengthening the school day (Bouie, 1987). The immediate effects of Bouie's program were that student study time increased and parents modeled high educational expectations. Parents in one Kansas high school are now tutoring students, sponsoring orientations, coordinating college clinics, compiling reading lists, and arranging for guest speakers because of an innovative program to involve parents as partners (Sandfort, 1987).

The prior research is convincing that schools are improving student performance by involving parents in a myriad of ways. Social contracts, attendance monitoring, parent-teacher meetings, in-class and at-home tutoring, and programs to help better educate parents are all ways in which schools are reaching out to parents. Parents, for the most part, genuinely appear eager to help with their child's education. The above mentioned programs, and others like them, are a testament to the successes possible for the schools who are willing to make the attempt to reach out to parents.

It is obvious that schools can and have succeeded in getting parents involved. So why is it that after nearly three decades schools are still searching for ways to make long-term connections with their students' parents?

Why Is There Still a Problem?

Though a multitude of intervention strategies purport to increase parent involvement in schools, it is doubtful that every intervention is as effective in each situation as the program planners might want. If this were the case then one streamlined intervention program, or some finite number of programs, would have become known as "the programs that work in this kind of setting." These programs would have been established and communicated to schools to meet almost every possible parent involvement situation. If it were the case that all interventions were effective all of the time, the incidence of parent involvement research articles should have decreased over the years instead of increasing.

Unfortunately we know that the majority of parent involvement interventions have been increasing over the last few years. A change in public attitude toward the school, coupled with an increasing desire on the

part of professional educators to involve parents in educational functions, contributes to this change. Most of the interventions, though, have been attempted at the preschool (Bronfenbrenner, 1985) and early elementary grade levels (Brandt, 1989). Fewer studies have been reported at the junior and senior high school levels. What research there is, however, is convincing that parent involvement at all levels of schooling can lead to positive outcomes for the child, the parent, and the school.

We believe that parent involvement is important and effective at all levels of schooling. Furthermore, it is clear from prior studies that parents are involved in different ways and for different purposes as their children mature and move through our public education system. In the early years, parents' involvement with schools takes the form of field trip monitors, bake sale participants, at-home tutors and, increasingly, in-class teacher's aides. During junior high and high school, parental emphasis shifts toward the role of advisor, confidant, and administrator, as adolescents seek autonomy and begin to plan a life on their own.

The large number of different programs found throughout the literature would suggest that not all parents are as involved with their child's education as the schools would want them to be. Teachers would not still complain of the difficulties of getting parents to attend conferences, check homework, or answer notes if parents were that involved. Gay Eastman (1988) relates the story of one failed program, where the failure to involve parents seemed to be linked to the parents not being seen as partners with the school in general and with the teachers in particular. Eastman emphasizes the importance of conceiving the parent as a complement to the teacher and not an adversary, as is often the case. The perceptions each player has of the others' roles (i.e. parents, teachers, administrators, and students) would seem to be of primary importance. One key to gaining a parent's involvement would be to reinforce in parents their own importance to the student and to the school.

Even presuming that most parents are genuinely interested in the education of their children, it is true that some parents will still be relatively uninvolved with the school. The question then is, "Why isn't this parent involved?" Patricia Clark Brown (1989) lists the following possible reasons for low parent involvement:

1. Lack of time. Working parents are often unable to attend school events during the day.
2. Feelings of inadequacy. For many parents, school was not a positive experience. They may feel they do not possess the skills to help.
3. Overstepping their bounds. Confident parents may feel they should not "interfere" with the school's business (p. 3).

Albert Holliday (1986) reiterates and expands upon her list, adding:

1. School's organizational structure does not lend itself to sustained parent-teacher contact.
2. Adolescents are increasingly independent and may resist when parents attempt to become involved (p. 7).

It appears that there are abundant benefits to be gained for schools by seeking to involve the parents of their students. It is reasonable to assume that schools will want to make attempts at securing those benefits. Our review and synthesis of the literature base convinces us that schools must seek to match their intervention strategies to the needs of the parents in their district. By "targeting" their interventions, schools will use the programs that are the most effective at addressing the needs of the parents at whom they are aimed. Furthermore, before it is possible to "target" an intervention to a need, we must first understand the needs. Analysis of the previous research provides distinct indications of reasons why parents are not involved, or involved only slightly, in their children's education. Schools conversant with the reasons underlying low parent involvement can, we feel, better design and target their planned interventions.

Potential Reasons for Low Parental Involvement

No Prior Involvement

Parents operating from this perspective were previously rarely involved in their student's education. They feel that since they have never really had much contact with the school or their child's teacher(s) they really don't need to be involved now or at any time in the future. Parents may perceive their role as parents does not involve having anything to do with the formal education of their child. Interventions to involve these parents more would focus on improving the home-school relationship. Such interventions would focus on establishing a dialogue between the school as an entity and the parent to explore each player's expectations of the other.

My Kid is OK

Under this model, the parents believe that their child is doing fine in school and further involvement on their part is not needed. This case may be typified by the child who has all A's with the exception of a low or failing grade in one course. The parent minimizes the importance of the one low grade under the assumption that the child has always been a good student and that this is undoubtedly an aberrant occurrence. Once again, as in the

previous reason, there is a miscommunication between home and school as to what each expects of the other.

Adolescent Seeking Self

Here the parents feel that their involvement is unwanted by the student. The parents rationalize that the student is going through a developmental phase and shuns parents' opinions. Such a parent might comment, "My input would be worthless since Joey ignores me anyway." This rationale is most prevalent in junior and senior high school and is meant to reference the change in the parent-student relationship that comes with the onset of adolescence, a striving for independence and individual identity. Patricia Clark Brown (1989) postulated a similar rationale. In order to be of service to both parent and student, interventions by the school might focus on improving the parent-child relationship through guided relationship building exercises.

Parent Abdicates Responsibility

The parents feel it is the school's job to educate their child and refuse to take on any of that responsibility. The parents remain uninvolved and out of touch with their child's educational process. Sandfort (1987) refers to this reason as "turn over" psychology and emphasizes the need for parents to once again "own" responsibility for their children's education. This reasoning is probably better known as the "logic of confidence" argument. This argument posits that teachers are performing competently and do not require close supervision (Meyer & Rowan, 1977). Central to the "logic of confidence" argument is what Meyer and Rowan (1978) call the myth of professionalism. This is the notion that teachers can be expected to adhere to professional standards of performance and conduct because they hold appropriate degrees and certificates. School interventions to reach abdicating parents might include inviting parents into the classroom as observers.

Single Subject Classes

In high school, unlike elementary school, the child has several subjects and several different teachers. The changing of classes and teachers insures that there is no single identifiable contact person with whom a parent can build a "school" relationship. The "theme" of the teacher as a whole is reduced. For better or worse teachers become the subjects they teach. A similar rationale has been postulated by Holliday (1986). Further, Ziegler

(1987) adds that "because of the rotary system and subject specializations, it is much more difficult for parents to know their children's teachers, and also to feel competent to help older children with their work" (p. 31).

Schools striving to reach parents should encourage teachers to contact parents more frequently either in person or via telephone. Also, school counselors could be utilized as contact persons for parents to call with questions regarding their child. The counselor could then coordinate with the child's teacher(s) to provide parents the answers they need.

The "New Math"

Ziegler's previous quotation inspires this reasoning as well. Here parents feel that the work the student is doing is beyond their personal expertise. Parents feel that they must be the expert in each subject. When they discover that they are not, they lose confidence in their ability to help. The research plainly shows, however, that parents' understanding of the work is not as important to student achievement as their willingness to try and help. Schools attempting to reach these parents could institute "refresher" parent education courses. These courses could emphasize the importance of the parent helping the child solve problems and helping to find the answers. The major intervention a school could make would be to help the parent(s) realize that they need not be able to do the child's course-work. School can make parents facilitators to education regardless of whether parents are ready or willing to be deliverers of education.

Hands Off

In this rationale parents perceive the school sending the message that parents do not understand educational practices, and therefore parents should not attempt to educate their children personally. Given the message that they are unqualified to help, parents avoid becoming involved in the education of their student. This case is most clearly evident in the failed intervention described by Eastman (1988). Accordingly, schools should nurture the role of parents as partners, complementing the teacher in the classroom, instead of parents as adversaries.

Parents Have No Time (Other Jobs/Odd Hours)

The parent who reports that he or she has no time to dedicate to being involved with his or her child's education often works many hours per week or is otherwise not available when the child is available. This rationale often underlies the inability of some parents to attend scheduled meetings with teachers or other school related functions. There is literally "no time." In order to reach this parent schools should look at the times they are offering for interaction with parents. Scheduling times other than

the traditional "after school" slot for parent meetings could possibly help parents who have little time.

Parents Have No Time (Elect Other Activities)

This rationale is similar to the prior designation in that the parent(s) again report that they do not have time to devote to being involved with the school and/or their child's education. Unlike the parent who is working to maintain family basic needs, these parents elect to engage in other activities such as clubs or simply relaxing at home rather than working with their children. Schools should understand that there are parents whose attitudes will not be changed. If increased attempts to meet with parents, educate parents as facilitators, and generally bring parents in as partners in the children's education fail, then schools should look into providing extra educational support for the children.

A Negative Parental Attitude

In some cases parents have been turned off to school for some reason. They undervalue education and do not place importance in its attainment. For example, the parent who was never very successful in school, or for whom school was a traumatic experience, might fit into this ration-ale for low involvement. The parent with this attitude is clearly not sending a positive message to the child concerning the importance of education. Such an attitude is contradictory to Eagle (1989), Hart (1988), and several other theorists who state that parental emphasis on education is necessary for increased student achievement. While schools cannot change a parent's past experience, schools may be able to change current opinions by inviting parents into the school: (1) to observe classes, (2) for special programs and presentations, and (3) to provide input to the school regarding the types of classes and experiences parents would like their children to have.

Communication is Key

Regardless of the reason (or reasons) for low parental involvement one point remains consistent and clear throughout the literature. The first step in any parent involvement program includes the school reaching out to the parent. The exact ways and means of the involvement must vary according to the situation of the school and the parents, but all programs must begin with the simple act of communicating. Without the ability to talk with the parent, school programs cannot succeed.

This point was made abundantly clear in an ongoing piece of research in

which we are both involved. Called Project Homeroom, this effort involves three Chicago-area high schools, IBM, and Ameritech. Selected students from each school received IBM personal computers and separate telephone lines for the purpose of communicating with their teachers. These students were organized into a common group with several teachers given responsibility for their core subject education. Computer and telecommunications equipment was placed in the schools, and also into the teachers' homes. In addition to specialized instructional software the project participants were given access to the Prodigy Information Service, to be used for both information access and electronic mail.

An early emphasis of Project Homeroom was to increase the involvement of participating student's parents. Parents were brought into the school early in the development of the program to explain components of the project. Special training sessions were also held at each of the schools to instruct the parents on the use of Prodigy and electronic mail. It was the plan of each school to have teachers routinely communicate with both students and parents through this electronic mail service.

As with any new enterprise, complications and problems arose during the first year of implementation (1991-92). Telecommunications and computer difficulties prevented all schools from coming "on-line" right at the start of the year. Many parents had to be coaxed into using the computer technology, with some never actually using it throughout the year. Many of the participating teachers reported using regular voice telephone conversations as an augment to the electronic mail.

By the end of the first year, however, interviews with both the teachers and parents described a large increase in the number of school-parent interactions as compared to the start of the year. Parents knew more of what their child was doing in school, were more cognizant of their successes and difficulties, and were more comfortable in approaching and speaking with their child's teacher. In a meeting held later in the year several parents complained that "the teachers were not as accessible [as they thought they should be]," even though these same parents reported conversing (through electronic mail or by voice) with their child's teachers an average of three to five times each week.

Teachers, for their part, had to change their view that school is "only an 8 to 3" proposition. They established regular hours outside of the school day to check their electronic mail and to respond, by regular voice telephone when necessary, to parent questions or concerns. One teacher reported having to finally "unplug the telephone" after parent calls continued into the evening well past any reasonable hour. Other teachers used a combination of electronic mail and voice answering machines to keep up with the flood of parental interest.

While all schools will not be able to implement a computer messaging

program as accomplished in Project Homeroom, the missive from its results are clear. Parent involvement begins with school-parent communication. When a school is able to find ways that increase the likelihood of parents and teachers talking, those parents and teachers will converse with each other. Programs targeted at a specific parental needs and desires can then be planned and established.

Conclusion

In 1981, Henderson came to the conclusion, "The form of parent involvement does not seem to be critical, so long as it is reasonably well-planned, comprehensive, and long-lasting" (p. 7). Eleven years later it would seem that Henderson's argument still holds up quite well. It should be amended, however, to say that the form of the involvement does indeed seem to be critical. In order to involve the maximum number of parents in the education of their children, schools must understand the personal needs of those parents. Schools cannot understand their students' parents unless they are in two-way communication with those parents. Once teachers and students are really talking, schools must then plan their interventions and programs to focus on parental needs. We believe that we will begin to see fewer parent involvement programs reported once schools begin to undertake this approach. Further, the programs that will be reported will, we believe, show a greater success in terms of the number of parents they reach and keep involved with the school.

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