Broadening the Definition of School Success with School-Family Partnerships

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In an age when the definition of school success is becoming increasingly narrowed to signify success on criterion-referenced tests, the recent book edited by Patrikakou, Weissberg, Redding, and Walberg, *School-Family Partnerships for Children's Success*, is a timely and important contribution to the literature on schools and families. The book, published in 2005 by Teachers College Press, works counter to the currently shrinking definition of school success by adding social learning, emotional learning, and meeting community needs to academic achievement as important goals for any school. With chapters on models of school-family partnerships, working with diverse communities, and the positive effects of implementing comprehensive school-family programs, the book provides information from many of the most respected and well-known researchers in the field. Teachers, parents, administrators, researchers, and policymakers all stand to gain new insights from this volume.

With a firm grounding in empirical research provided by Arthur Reynolds and Melissa Clements (chapter 6, "Parental Involvement and Children's School Success") and a frank acknowledgement of the current political environment from Oliver Moles (chapter 7, "School-Family Relations and Student Learning: Federal Education Initiatives") and Sam Redding and Pamela Sheley (chapter 8, "Grass Roots From the Top Down: The State's Role in School-Family Partnerships"), the entire book focuses on how educators can take advantage of opportunities to improve student learning by involving families. The authors take the vagueness of parental roles as described in the No Child Left Behind

(NCLB) legislation and turn it into models for implementation and recommendations for successful practice.

The integral first chapter by Christenson, Godber, and Anderson exemplifies the holistic approach to educating children taken by the authors throughout the book. The complexities of educational practice are exposed as they discuss the "conflicting values, motivations, or goals, about learning" (p. 22) that simultaneously can threaten the educational mission of schools and, on the other hand, form a potentially powerful lesson in democratic processes for our children. The systemic nature of a child's education becomes evident when neither a child's home life nor her school environment completely predict academic success. An educated child will successfully connect their home experiences and their school-based life. Thus, a child's success becomes an emergent property of the educational system, intimately connected to the home, the school, the community, and the child's own desires (Hutchins, 1996). Of course, those responsible for educating children are not powerless in this endeavor, but can learn from the strengths of other systems in the child's life. Christenson et al. offer a view of education that places meeting the needs of families on a par with meeting the educational needs of the student. The needs of the student cannot be met, they argue, if the needs of the family are not. Meeting the needs of diverse families requires a sensitivity to the differences among families and the use of a multitude of approaches to bring families into the fold as partners in their child's education. This move toward a "partnership orientation" coupled with a variety of high-quality options for family participation is seen as essential to the establishment of a positive school-family partnership.

The final chapter of the book, written by Nancy Feyl Chavkin ("Preparing Educators for School-Family Partnerships: Challenges and Opportunities"), highlights some of the reasons the majority of partnerships have not been as successful as they could be. While focusing on preservice teachers, Chavkin merely presents a case study of one important factor influencing school-family partnerships. Certainly, inservice teachers and school administrators and policymakers must work in concert for a successful collaboration between the family and the school. Her review of studies of teacher certification requirements shows a lack of attention being placed on training teachers how to interact with families. This should come as no surprise to anyone who has been through such a process, as strategies for working with families often are discussed only tangentially in many programs. She does, however, offer several options of well-developed programs that have ranged from offering a series of courses in school-family partnerships to integrating such issues into pre-existing courses. The use of programs such as the Southwest Educational Development Laboratory's IDEAL program and the Harvard Family Research Project's Seven

Key Knowledge Areas is proof that there are effective ways to inform educators of successful ways to reach out to families.

After establishing the benefit of family-school partnerships and the lack of successful implementation of such programs, the editors close the book with a set of recommendations for those seeking to maximize the positive impact of families on the education of young people. Their first priority is communication that is constant, two-way, and inviting to families. Communication channels should provide multiple access points to school activities and focus on the positive ways in which parents can strengthen the school, as opposed to being limited to reports of undesirable behavior or poor academic performance. Second, the importance of specific, written policies is cited. These policies hold districts and states, as well as parents, accountable for participating in the school-family partnership. Third, the establishment of a positive climate builds interest in—and the productivity of—partnerships. Having space, personnel, and resources dedicated to parents is an important part of creating such a climate. Fourth, recognizing the unique contributions of the diversity of families within a given school is important in a successful effort. Recognizing linguistic needs of the families falls under this category, as does addressing the cultural variation in the expected role of schools. Fifth, outreach to parents must be positive (see point 1) and systematic. Sixth, there must be a clear evaluation plan in place to judge the effectiveness of the partnership. And finally, teachers and staff should have training available for involving parents in the schools. Given the importance of the parental role and the relative lack of training school employees receive, this is a step that must be central to any strong parental relationship.

The authors of *School-Family Partnerships for Children's Success* provide a convincing message at an important time in the struggle to improve our nation's schools. Their collective message is that education involves the development of all aspects of a child (academic, social, and emotional), and that without the committed involvement of families, schools are wasting a valuable educational resource.

References

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