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**The Family Involvement School Consultant: A Model for Involving Families and
Parents in Their Children Education**

Sherwood Thompson, Ed.D and Masila Mutisya, Ed.D

Introduction

The age-old question still remains the same—why is parent and family involvement in children's education important? The answer remains the same also: because it's good for the educational achievement of children. Parent and family involvement is still on the forefront of educational research topics. Getting parents to visit schools is an ongoing task; however, it is a task that must be tackled if educators and communities hope to change the way we educate children.

In this paper, the authors establish that comprehensive responsibility for student achievement is firmly placed on the family and parent (s). The parent has always been, and is continually, responsible for the growth of their children—their schooling (human intellectual growth) which offers knowledge and understanding of life. Parents are responsible for teaching children to take responsibility for learning. A child's parent and family, of course, will be the

foremost teachers in the child's life—their first instructors (Trotman, 2001; Greenwood & Hickman, 1991). Developing a partnership with parents and schools will help children achieve and improve their behavior in school.

Parental Involvement

A select number of research studies on parent and family involvement strongly urge parents to become vigilant about their children's education. Michelle F. Trotman (2001) maintains that parents can serve as advocates, collaborating with school teachers and enhancing the educational experiences of children. This collaboration requires that parents and teachers engage in a process where they labor together and work jointly to assist in making the learning experience a meaningful one for the student. Parents should take the opportunity to interact with school personnel to confer, consult, and collaborate as a team on behalf of their child's education (Olmsted, 1991; Banks & Banks, 2007).

Parents impact their children's lives in a lasting way. With some exceptions, most parents have experienced school and know something about the culture of learning. This fact illustrates why parents should actively get involved with their child's education by formally participating in the various activities that take place in schools. Children, in most cases, are unaware of the importance of having their parent's involvement in their school life. Their world is shaped by what they observe, their language, their culture, what they hear from adults, and the socialization they receive at home and at school. And one could, of course, make the argument that if children did fully understand the role parents

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play in their education, then conceivably children would plead with their parents to spend more time working toward academic achievement.

Yan's (1999) study indicated that there is equal parental involvement in families of successful African American students; however, parents must often put forth additional effort to discuss school-related topics with their child. There needs to be an increased awareness of the social and cultural differences between African American and European-American families and the impact these differences can have on parental involvement.

Casanova (1996) points out both the positive and negative consequences of parental involvement. Involvement can be positive if there is a cohesive and respectful relationship between parents and educators in which concerns can be addressed to benefit the children. Parental involvement is found to be negative when the parent fails to trust the educator. Some negative aspects of parental involvement are also due, in part, to the cultural differences that exist within school systems and the community. Parents from different social and cultural backgrounds often have varying levels of involvement.

Social and cultural differences exist between schools and families and serve as barriers to parental involvement (Casanova (1996). Yan encourages educators and policymakers to have an increased awareness of these differences in order to make a difference in the student's learning experience. Comer and Haynes (1991) support an ecological approach that examines the interaction of families and schools and that will promote child development and learning through the cooperative efforts between the school and families.

The need for parents and families to understand the importance of school/home

relationships is tremendous. Joyce L. Epstein (1985) maintains that schools of the future will only improve when schools and families "... work together [and] understand each other's potential for improving the education of the children they share" (p.18). Barr & Parrett (2007) maintain that in order to garner parent and family support for students, especially low income families, school officials must develop effective two way communication between schools and home. "To be active in the education of poor minority students, teachers and administrators must demonstrate a continuous two-way communication with parents, extended family, and guardians" (p.87). Keeping an open line of communication with parents is a respectful means of showing that school care about all children.

According to Concha Gaitan (2001), there are some specific considerations to keep in mind when interacting with Latino families. First and foremost, Gaitan stresses that when working with Latino families, school officials should practice dedicated listening skills. "Effective listening is the starting point of all interpersonal communication with Latino parents" (p.27). Gaitan goes on to suggest that in order to make Latino parents feel welcome in the schools, one should assign bilingual educators to communicate with these parents on a regular basis; and they should call and write to these parents to report on their children's strengths and progress (p.27).

School attendance in the United States is compulsory by law. Thus, all school-age children are expected to be in a classroom during the normal school year. The parent's role in complying with this law is to make sure that the child is ready to learn and is in school. But, the parent's role goes far beyond making sure that their child is in school. Parents are also expected to play a support role in ensuring that the child

is succeeding in school.

On the other hand, schools have a role in promoting parent involvement. Recent school reform efforts have emphasized greater parental and family involvement, including increased attendance at school assemblies, attendance at PTO meetings, open houses, and conferences with teachers as effective ways for building parent/school partnerships (Ironie, W.S. & Slowiaczek, 1994; Epstein, 1996; Banks & Banks, 2007).

School Development Program

Comer (2005) provides an overview of the School Development Program that was developed in Connecticut. The program was designed to address the issues of parental involvement in the schools and consisted of a ten- element framework to address the issues. These elements include school planning and management team, student and staff support team, a parent program/team, no-fault problem solving, consensus decision making, collaboration, development of a comprehensive school plan, staff development, assessment and modification, and a mental health team. The parent program focuses on parental involvement on three levels: general participation, helping in classrooms or sponsoring and supporting school programs, and serving as part of the school's governance structure as elected parent members. The goal of the program is to create an environment where parents are respected and can contribute to their child's development.

Model of Parental Involvement Program

Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler (1997) developed the Model of the Parental Involvement Process that outlines the specific variables that influence involvement. The model consists of five levels that seek to explain the development of involvement and the key factors that

influence this development. Level one pertains to the parent's decision about involvement and what influences this decision. The goal of level one is to answer the question of "Why do parents become involved in their children's education?" According to Hoover, Dempsey and Sandler, parents' fundamental decision to become involved in children's education is a function primarily of three constructs: a) the parent's construction of his or her role in the child's life, b) the parent's sense of efficacy for helping her or his child succeed in school, and c) the general invitations, demands, and opportunities for parental involvement presented by both the child and the child's school (p. 8-9). Their research suggests that in order to improve parental involvement, efforts must focus, in part, on these three components.

Success Factors

The authors of this study concluded, based on the review of the literature and based on their own professional experience, that parents play a major role in their children educational outcome. Our research and professional observations indicate that the following are success factors in helping children succeed in school:

Parent and family involvement in education is critical to the academic achievement of school children.

Regular communication between parent and students must take place in the home.

Schools and families equal a success formula that leads to higher grades and test scores, for students.

Parents and teachers must be the first lines of defense in helping students develop confidence in school. Together, this team must work to ensure that students enjoy their school experience, and that students understand how to function in school.

When parents are involved with their children's education at home, higher student

achievement is realized in school.

Students gain increased self-assurance and a positive attitude about life in general.

Parents should understand the importance of school/home relationships for helping their children understand the role education plays in society.

Parents model why learning is important and why schools and teachers are vital to children's success in classrooms. Conversely, parents become the coach, the personal consultant to their children, motivating them to succeed.

Parents should establish a time and a quiet place to study for their children.

Parents should set limits on watching TV and social activities.

Parents should communicate the value of education and self-discipline.

Parents should set high, but realistic, expectations for the achievement of their children.

There is hope for the next generation of school children, especially ethnic minorities and at-risk children, when more parents and families engage in school activities and teacher collaborations. Noll (2006) suggests that "schools can work miracles" when active parents and extended families do their part in demonstrating an interest in their children's education.

The Role of Schools in Parent Involvement

Research indicates that in high performing schools with a large population of at-risk children, the one key to academic achievement is the collaboration between parents and teachers (Barr & Parrett, 2007). Schools play a major role in encouraging parents to get involved with their children's education. The school administration and faculty can not just wait for parents to step onto the campus of their children's school grounds. A proactive approach is needed on the part of schools to motivate involvement

and this approach starts with improved communications between schools and parents. To get parents energized about their role and interaction with schools, one research team recommends five steps that can increase parent/community involvement in classrooms:

Step 1. Establish two-way communications

Step 2. Enlist support from staff and students

Step 3. Enlist support from the community

Step 4. Develop resource materials for home use

Step 5. Broaden the activities included in parent involvement (Banks, Banks 2007).

The students from at-risk backgrounds seem to get reinforcement from the attention their parents or adult family members give them. The teacher only has to mention in class that the parents of a particular student came to visit and the conversation was pleasant and productive, and that student's interest in learning actually increases. The students feel validated by the teacher's comments and by the parents' show of interest in their progress.

Schools can also encourage parents and family members to join professional development sessions in order to share their experiences and life styles with teachers and administrators. Engaging parents with schools in this manner helps to develop respect for the role of the teacher and for the role of the adult family members. Having parents and family members visit schools and serve as transmitters of cultural information can also help reduce prejudice and stereotypes. "Such cooperative sharing and development can help [reduce] prejudice [in] schools, improve student behavior, establish safe and orderly classrooms and schools, and ease the 'clash

of culture' that too often typifies public education in poor communities" (Barr & Parrett, 2007, p.86).

Another area where parents can get involved is in helping schools with special projects. Based on the specific expertise of parents, their talents can be used in the school that their student attends to provide help with related projects and on one-time activities. For instance, if a parent is skilled in carpentry, that parent might want to volunteer to help the theatre build stage props for an upcoming play. The same concept can infuse greater involvement on the part of parents by having talented parents assist teachers in science projects. Language classes have an opportunity to invite parents who speak languages other than English to visit classes to share their language and culture with students. Parents can serve in schools as consultants--as the experts (Senge, 2000). The list of possibilities is endless. However, there must be an effort on the part of the school to reach out and involve the parents in meaningful ways. Parents love the attention and recognition this type of service provides.

Wolf and Stephens (1989) provide suggestions for teachers and administrators to improve their relationships with parents. They suggest that time should be devoted to communicating with parents of "targeted children." These are children that teachers may have concerns about, who are frequently absent, who have chronic behavior problems, or may have poor physical and emotional states. In order to successfully communicate and collaborate with these parents, teachers need to have established practices when conducting a parent-teacher conference such as establishing an inviting environment, avoiding educational jargon, building rapport, obtaining relevant information, and providing information, and planning strategies for follow-up.

The literature is quite clear about parental involvement: the more of it, the better children will perform in school (Pawlas, 2005; Barr & Parrett, 2007; Grolnick & Slowiaczek, 1994; Coleman & Wallinga, 2000; Stevenson & Baker, 1987). And, the rewards can be felt by all concerned parties—students, schools and parents (Comer, 2005).

The Family Involvement School Consultant

The establishment of a Parent-Involvement School Consultant (FISC) in schools and district offices to work in involving families in schools is also recommended by the authors. The FISC can serve as a facilitator and point of contact for school/parent relations. It can also facilitate effective communication, cooperation, and coordination as well as serve as a mechanism that can be used to confer, consult, and collaborate with parents and schools to support school-age children's academic success. As a result, teachers and partners would come together and have opportunities to engage in positive interaction. Communication among school personnel, families, and students helps to forge better relationship building which encourages greater cooperation in achieving the common goal of increased school success among students. The fundamental role of a FISC is to market specialized information toward families, promote service needs, and encourage parents and families to get involved with schools leading to a team of professionals and parents working together for student success.

Defining Clear Goals for the Family Involvement and School Consultant Center

The FISC should identify what goals are important for establishing a family and parent marketing plan. These goals naturally serve as the guiding elements of what actions will be taken to implement a

well designed operational plan. Such actions might include:

An effective communications strategy that will inform families and parents about the school.

Encouraging parents to gain a greater interest in what goes on at the school.

Persuading families and parents to see the school as "their" school, to become partners with the school's teachers and administrators, and to overcome misconceptions and misunderstanding about the school.

Clarifying false rumors about the school's personnel.

Introducing the entire faculty, staff, and school administrators to families and parents.

Finding community supporters who are willing to serve as volunteers for school projects.

Securing timely information to families and parents about school activities.

Asking for families and parents to share their talents and expertise in school activities.

Developing and implementing incentives to increase parents and family attendance at school activities.

Attract people of import, and successful school alumni to school activities as a draw to motivate families and parental participation.

Marketing

The Family Involvement School Consultant's responsibilities include developing a marketing plan for the school that establishes realistic goals for interacting with school children and their parents and families. Local neighborhoods would be targeted, as well as neighborhoods that are in the proximity of the school and beyond the school location. Identifying the neighborhoods where students are from will allow the FISC to develop a comprehensive understanding of the diversity of the student

population. This understanding will help the FISC in planning appropriate interventions for families and parents. The FISC serves as the point of contact and family advocate for encouraging parents to get involved with their school-age children's education. The FISC also helps parents to take ownership in their children's schools and help families and parents to understand how schools work.

Establishing a parent involvement school consultant in the school can also lead to improved outreach services of the school through more effective one-on-one communications, cooperation, and coordination of school activities with families and parents. The sole purpose of the FISC is to support student success. Serving as advocate to families and parents, as well as a liaison between businesses and schools. One effective strategy has been to encourage businesses to establish lunchtime flex hours so that parents can visit their children during the noon hour. The FISC might also negotiate with businesses to get them to grant time off for parents to volunteer in schools, assist their children with school activities, attend teacher conferences, and participate in other education activities.

In summary, the role of a FISC in a school setting is to market specialized information to families and parents to promote school services for the purpose of encouraging parents to get involved with schools for the wellbeing of their children. The FISC and teaching partners in the schools can provide opportunities for engaging in positive interaction among school personnel, families, and parents who are working together to achieve the school's success among students. In turn, the FISC becomes a positive role model for families and parents while promoting healthy school and community interactions.

Conclusion

Successful businesses have one thing in common, they all market their products and services. Schools, on the other hand, have a prevailing culture that expects people to come to them, especially parents and family members. Schools have a dismal record of getting parents and families involved in school activities. It has been the overriding practice that schools would conduct PTA/PTO meetings, bake sales, hold open houses, and parent and teacher conferences, only to see minimal involvement from parents. In some rural and smaller communities, family and parental involvement is commonplace. In this case, the school was viewed as a community center, a family gathering place that routinely sponsors plays, musicals, and sporting events. Unfortunately, this practice is not the norm in most urban schools.

Today, with the variance of family makeup, the nature of household culture, and changing demographics, it has become more difficult to get parents and families involved in school activities.

The authors propose that a structured approach be used to increase parental and family involvement in schools. Schools cannot just sit around hoping that parents and/or families will somehow just show up. Schools should employ a workable strategy to get parents and/or responsible family members into the schools as well as keep them coming back. We go on to propose the creation of the Family Involvement School Consultant as an effective agent for systematically focusing on developing workable strategies to encourage parents and families to become involved with schools. Further, we envision schools where the Family Involvement School Consultant would become as commonplace in schools as curriculum coordinators, school psychologists, school counselors, and resource officers. The Family Involvement

School Consultant would help to fight apathy among parents and families as well as serve as a designated person or a point of contact to systematically zero in on promoting healthy school/family relationships.

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