

## Conclusion

This report contains a very different mix of studies from those in the 1994 review, *A New Generation of Evidence* (Henderson and Berla). First, there is far more research on parent involvement in middle and high school and on how involvement shifts as children grow older. There are also more studies of how parent involvement varies by social class, gender, and ethnicity.

Second, there is a growing body of research about effective practice at schools. In 1994, the new trend was such national program models for engaging families as Parents As Teachers and the Quality Education Program. Now, in addition to research on such interventions, there are close studies of high-achieving schools. These look at the many ways families are engaged in improving student achievement—and in making schools better.

Third, community organizing and constituency building for school reform have opened a new arena of research. This form of involvement is based outside schools, reflects parent and community priorities, and is led by local parents and residents. Aimed at improving low-income schools, it is part of a movement to build power in low-income communities and hold local officials accountable for poor performance. These recent developments in the field have considerable implications for theory and practice.

When we combine these recent studies with earlier research, we see strong and steadily growing evidence that families can improve their children's academic performance in school. Families also have a major impact on other key outcomes, such as attendance and behavior, that affect achievement. When families of all backgrounds are engaged in their children's learning, their children tend to do better in school, stay in school longer, and pursue higher education. Clearly, children at risk of failure or poor performance can profit from the extra support that engaged families and communities provide.

All students, but especially those in middle and high school, would benefit if schools support parents in helping children at home and in guiding their educational career. Studies that look at high-achieving students of all backgrounds found that their parents encourage them, talk with them about school, help them plan for higher education, and keep them focused on learning and homework. The continuity that this constant support provides helps students through changes of school, program, and grade level.

This does *not* mean, however, that parent involvement at school is unimportant. It means that the ways parents are involved at school should be linked to improving learning, developing students' skills in specific subjects, and steering students toward more challenging classes. Parent involvement programs should also be designed to develop close working relationships between families and teachers.

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The studies identified several ways that schools can assist families in developing their capacity to support their children's education:

- Engage them at school so they understand what their children are learning.
- Give them a voice in what happens to their children.
- Provide information about how to help their children at home, what their children need to learn, and how to plan for college, postsecondary education, and a career.
- Foster social connections among families and with teachers.
- Build families' understanding of the education system and how to guide their children through it successfully.
- Offer access to social services and community agencies.
- Identify and build on strengths in the community and among families.

**How can a school use these findings to engage families in improving student achievement?**

- Adopt a family-school partnership policy. The philosophy behind it should see the total school community as committed to making sure that every single student succeeds at a high level and to working together to make that happen.
- Identify target areas of low achievement. Work with families to design workshops and other activities to give them information about how to help their children. Lend learning materials for families to use at home. Get their ideas for how to help their children learn.
- Offer professional development for school staff on working productively with families. Invite families to attend.
- Look at your current parent involvement program. How is it linked to learning? Work with families and teachers to add a learning component to every activity and communication for families. Think about new and different activities that will create a learning community.

Studies that offer helpful information: Clark, 1993; Epstein, Simon, and Salinas; Miedel and Reynolds; Van Voorhis; and Westat and Policy Studies Associates.

### **How can an elementary school link with preschool programs and middle schools to create a steady structure of support for families across transitions?**

- Check your students' kindergarten readiness. Map the early childhood programs in your community. Do most children in the community have access to such programs? Are they designed to teach children the skills they will need as they enter school? Compare them to designs for high-quality programs that work with families. If these programs need to be redesigned or expanded, draw up a plan with your families and community supporters and present it to the district.
- Develop ties with the middle schools your students will attend. Invite them to send some staff to meet with your families, at your school, to talk about the middle school. Develop some strategies with their staff about preparing children so that when they leave middle school, they will be ready for challenging academic work in high school. Suggest that the middle school do the same with their feeder high schools.

Studies that offer helpful information: Baker et al., Kagitcibasi et al./HIPPIY, Jordan et al./ Project EASE, Mathematica/Early Head Start, Starkey and Klein/Head Start Family Math, Gutman and Midgley, and Catsambis.

### **How can a school connect to community groups to develop more supports for student learning?**

- Contact local community groups and ask them for help. They can do outreach with families to let them know what is happening at school and encourage them to attend events and activities. They can help press the district for more resources to accomplish your achievement plan. They can recruit and train volunteers and staff for your school and for after-school programs.
- Map the after-school and summer learning programs in your community. Is their content linked to the school's curriculum? Are their staff aware of your students' academic skills that need strengthening? If not, invite them to the school, share curriculum materials with them, and go over the performance data. Establish a partnership to monitor student progress.

Studies that offer helpful information: Clark, 2002; Mediratta and Fruchter; Shirley; Wilson and Corbett; Dryfoos; Invernizzi; and Newman.

## Final Points

While engaging families can help improve student achievement, it is not enough to overcome the deficits of low-quality schools. We also need high-quality initiatives to improve teaching and learning. Joyce Epstein and her colleagues made these points in their 1997 study of a family-school partnership program in Baltimore. Although they found that a well-implemented program of partnerships may help boost student skills, they also cautioned that in many urban districts, “fewer than 20 percent of students reach satisfactory scores on the state’s new assessments in writing, reading, or math. School, family, and community partnerships can boost attendance and increase achievement slightly, but excellent classroom teaching will be needed to dramatically improve students’ writing, reading, and math skills to meet the state’s standards. . . .” (p. 4).

The studies reviewed in this report suggest that the high-quality programs and school reform efforts needed in these districts will be more effective if they engage families. They also suggest that efforts to engage families will be more effective in improving achievement if they are part of a reform program. Engaging families and community organizations should be considered an essential part of any strategy to narrow the achievement gap between middle-class white students and low-income students and students of color.

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The potential of family and community involvement to raise student achievement is in the spotlight as never before. The No Child Left Behind Act, passed and signed into law in 2001, is the largest federal commitment ever made to improving elementary and secondary education. Not only does it mandate that all students achieve competence in the core subjects, it also requires annual testing to measure progress and holds the schools accountable for results. If a school does not improve, parents may request that their children be moved to another, more-effective school. Increased parent and family involvement is a key lever in the accountability mechanism of the law.

The No Child Left Behind Act updates the federal Title I program and has important provisions for engaging families that schools and school districts must observe. All schools receiving Title I funds must follow these requirements:

- Develop a written parent involvement policy with parents and approved by parents. This policy must include how it will build the school’s capacity to engage families, address barriers to their involvement, and coordinate parent involvement in other programs.
- Notify parents and the community about this policy “in an understandable and uniform format.”
- Use at least 1 percent of the school’s Title I funds to develop a parent involvement program. This money can be used for a wide range of activities—to hire parent liaisons, hold workshops and meetings, provide transportation and childcare, and make home visits. The law defines parent involvement as activities that “improve student academic achievement and school performance.”

- Describe and explain the school's curriculum, standards, and assessments.
- Develop a parent-school compact, or agreement, about how families and the school will collaborate to ensure children's progress.
- Give parents detailed information on student progress at the school.

If a school is identified as low-performing, it must:

- Notify parents that the school has been designated as needing improvement and explain how parents can become involved in addressing the academic issues that resulted in the low performance.
- Inform parents that their children are eligible for supplemental services, arrange for those services, and make sure parents are informed regularly of their child's progress.

This legislation signals a clear and growing commitment to the role of families, not just to improve achievement, but to hold schools accountable for results. The law also gives schools significant resources to make the changes necessary to educate all children to high standards. Placing the findings of the research in this review into practice can help all schools build the partnership with families that will make this law work. Doing so could begin the process of community renewal in poor, urban, and rural districts across our country.

We hope that this information will assist educators, parent and community leaders, researchers, and policymakers in designing effective programs, research studies, and funding priorities. We believe that we all have the same end in mind: safe, nurturing, high-achieving schools that profit from their diversity and are powerful assets to their communities.