

Learning Outside of the School Classroom: What Teachers Can Do to Involve Family in Supporting Classroom Instruction

Teachers are a vital part of student achievement, a fact that is reinforced in the “Highly Qualified Teachers” section of the No Child Left Behind Act. However, in order to be effective and meet the needs of each student, teachers have to draw on all available resources. Though it is natural to think of these resources as school-based, in reality, family and community members are also viable resources. Many teachers are like Ms. Farley in the situation described in the Classroom Snapshot: they are struggling to find ways to provide students the individualized instruction they need. One resource often left untapped is family involvement in learning outside of the school classroom.



CLASSROOM SNAPSHOT

Ms. Farley has 26 students in her classroom. These students are at different ability and maturity levels; there are regular students, second-language learners, special education students, struggling students, and highly motivated achievers. She has to meet the needs of each of these students, simultaneously, every day. At times she feels completely overwhelmed with this task. Though her school has implemented a new sequenced curriculum, tutorial programs for low-performing students, and new instructional strategies, her students are still not mastering the content quickly enough. Many of the students simply need more individualized instruction.

Her students performed better on the district's first semester benchmark exam than the previous year; however, only 57 percent mastered all of the objectives. She had been hoping the new curriculum alignment and instructional strategies would raise the passing percentage on all objectives to at least 70 percent by the end of this school year, but now she is questioning if that can happen.

After talking to the other seventh-grade teachers, Ms. Farley realizes they are having the same problems. The question they keep asking is, how can they arrange for more one-on-one learning sessions for their students?

During a team meeting, one teacher stated that she wished the students could get help at home

that was coordinated with the efforts at school. Unfortunately, she said, there wasn't a way to help the parents assist the students with their lessons.

Everyone paid attention when one of the other staff members asked, “Why not? Why can't we involve family members in efforts to address the needs of each of our students?”

As they began to discuss the issue, some of the teachers expressed doubts as to whether these kinds of efforts would be successful. After all, it was also getting harder every year to get parent volunteers to plan school parties.

Ms. Farley asked, “Do our students really benefit academically from school parties? Is this how we should involve family members? Shouldn't we focus on involving parents in activities that actually support what we do in the classroom?”

Another teacher asked, “What is it we want parents to do?” The teachers all agreed they needed the family members to provide individualized help to students that reinforces the learning activities occurring in the classroom, sort of an at-home tutorial program.

The teachers began to discuss what they needed to consider in creating a process for encouraging learning outside of the school classroom that would support what was happening in the classroom.

What to Consider

Learning Outside of School: Family Involvement

Like Ms. Farley, teachers often struggle to find ways to provide individualized learning activities for students. The reality of the classroom is that there is a tremendous amount of material to be taught with limited time and resources. Meeting the needs of all students in every classroom is a daunting task. For teachers to meet this demand, they need to draw on all available resources, including family.

The growing body of evidence that points to positive benefits from family and community connections with schools consistently emphasizes that effective efforts don't just happen by chance. In fact, current research stresses the need for school staff to engage family members in learning strategies and techniques to use at home to support classroom lessons. (See Related Research section for more details on these studies.)

Teachers sometimes assume that if they send work home with students, families can provide assistance that will align to what is actually being done in the classroom. Too often, this is not the case. In order for these efforts to work, teachers must use a two-way process that ties directly to classroom instruction. Teachers give assistance to family members in their efforts to provide additional support to student learning; family members support teacher instruction through learning activities outside of the school classroom.

This does not mean that parent-family organizations' fundraising and special-event planning efforts are not

beneficial to students or to the school. These events can contribute positively to the school climate and help create an atmosphere of respect and trust. However, these efforts have little direct impact on meeting the learning needs of children.

To support classroom instruction, effective family and community involvement programs should be carefully designed to do the following:

- 1. Link with student achievement goals and school standards**
- 2. Engage families in activities that focus directly on issues related to student learning**
- 3. Use a variety of communication strategies to keep family members informed on what is happening in the classroom and what is needed to support student learning**
- 4. Build a school culture that is inclusive and supportive of family and community involvement**

For example, if teachers organize a potluck supper as part of a family math night where family members are engaged in sample classroom activity demonstrations, this effort is more likely to impact student achievement—particularly if it is designed specifically to encourage family members to engage in additional math activities with their children at home.



For More Ideas on This Strategy:

The Center for School, Family, and Community Partnerships at Johns Hopkins University has developed an interactive homework program called TIPS (Teachers Involve Parents in Schoolwork) that includes sample assignments to involve family members with students and their homework. Each sample has clear learning goals and instructions. There is also a section where parents and students can give feedback to the teacher. For more information about TIPS, contact:

Dr. Frances E. Van Voorhis
TIPS Coordinator
National Network of Partnership Schools
3003 N. Charles St., Ste. 200
Baltimore, MD 21218
(410) 516-8061
www.csos.jhu.edu/p2000/tips/TIPSmain.htm

Links to Learning: Supporting Learning in Out-of-School Time Programs is a 12-minute research-based video that illustrates the role after-school programs can play in student achievement and overall student development by identifying specific skills necessary to succeed in school. For more information or to order, contact:

National Institute on Out-of-School Time
Wellesley Center for Women
106 Central St.
Wellesley, MA 02481
(781) 283-2547
www.niost.org

Putting It Into Practice

Here are a few strategies for teachers that have been recommended by school, family, and community programs:

1 Engage parents in activities using role-playing about or demonstrations of how to work with children at home to reinforce classroom learning. This can be done during family-to-school events or home visits. When family members use a single well-understood strategy, it is much more effective than 10 scattered strategies.

2 Share key tools, rubrics, grading criteria, or strategies to help family members learn how to determine if a child is successful in learning the content or complete a homework or study assignment. Staff can share these instruments at open-house events, home visits, parent trainings during and outside of the school day, and class newsletters. Teachers should not assume that sending a document home for parents to read will result in automatic knowledge or understanding but rather should organize events to assist parents in learning how to use these instruments.

3 Engage family members and students in math and reading games at family nights where they can learn from one another. Traditionally, schools held one open house a year. Today, schools commonly invite family and community members to events several times each semester. Using these events to coordinate a school-wide effort on an academic theme or content area is a great way to focus the time for maximum benefit. Teachers should thoughtfully connect the activities at these events to classroom instruction.

4 Create special learning kits to lend to students for home use. These kits can be made of inexpensive materials and housed and organized for “check out” by individual teachers or the school librarian. Upper grade level school organizations, family-school organizations, or community service organizations can assemble and maintain these kits as one of their projects. To maximize utility, these kits should contain clear directions for use and be tied to key learning topics for classroom content.

5 Inform family members on standards in exhibits and other means. These efforts allow parents to see how their children’s schoolwork relates to state requirements. School staff can do the following:

- Develop a visual display at open houses and back-to-school nights that informs parents about content standards and how teachers must address them in the classroom
- Invite parent reactions to the standards during school gatherings
- Post information on the school Web site

When efforts are made in this area, teachers should give parents an opportunity to explore and define clear links between the school’s curriculum, instruction, and assessment and the state’s standards.

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Related Research

Project EASE (Early Access to Success in Education): In this Minnesota-based program, educators provided parents with literacy activities to do at home that reinforced classroom learning. Jordan, Snow, and Porche (2000) found that 248 students whose parents participated in Project EASE showed greater gains in language scores than a control group of 71 students who were not involved in home literacy activities.

Jordan, G. E., Snow, C. E., & Porche, M. V. (2000). Project EASE: The effect of family literacy project on kindergarten students' early literacy skills. *Reading Research Quarterly, 35*(4), 524-546. EJ 616175.

HIPPY (Home Instruction Program for Preschool Youngsters): In this program, trained paraprofessionals using role-playing and model lessons performed home visits and assisted parents in their efforts to engage children in learning at home. Baker, Piotrkowski, and Brooks-Gunn (1998) found as a part of a randomized controlled trial that students involved in a HIPPY program showed higher academic gains than students who were not involved in the HIPPY intervention. In a second study, Kagitcibasi, Sunar, and Bekman (2001) divided the students into three comparison groups: 1) children in home-based care whose mothers received HIPPY training, 2) children in custodial daycare where the mother was given no training, and 3) children in home-based care where the mother was given no training. They, too, found that students involved in the HIPPY program showed higher academic gains than those in the two comparison groups whose parents did not receive training.

Baker, A. J. L., Piotrkowski, C. S., & Brooks-Gunn, J. (1998). The effects of Home Instruction Program for Preschool Youngsters (HIPPY) on children's school performance at the end of program and one year later. *Early Childhood Research Quarterly, 13*(4), 571-588. EJ580313.

Kagitcibasi, C., Sunar, D., & Bekman, S. (2001). Long-term effects of early intervention: Turkish low-income mothers and children. *Applied Developmental Psychology, 22*, 333-361.

Title I Projects: In Title I projects, educators often use a variety of outreach efforts with parents to provide additional academic assistance to their students. Shaver and Walls (1998) found that gains in achievement were related to the quality of the family involvement in learning outside of the school in their evaluation of 71 Title I schools. Westat and Policy Studies Associates (2001) found that the amount of time parents participated in activities to support learning outside of the classroom was related to higher student achievement; this finding was based on a quasi-experimental study involving nine schools and 335 students.

Shaver, A. V., & Walls, R. T. (1998). Effect of Title I parent involvement on student reading and mathematics achievement. *Journal of Research and Development in Education, 31*(2), 90-97. EJ561992.

Westat and Policy Studies Associates. (2001). The longitudinal evaluation of school change and performance in Title 1 schools. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Education, Office of the Deputy Secretary, Planning and Evaluation Service. www.ed.gov/offices/OUS/PES/esed/lescp_highlights.html.

TIPS (Teachers Involving Parents in Schoolwork): In this Baltimore-based program, educators of students in grades 6–8 provided a structure for families to actively engage in supporting students in their schoolwork. Epstein, Simon, and Salinas (1997) studied eight teachers in 16 classes involved in the TIPS process. They found a strong correlation between improved student achievement and parent involvement. Van Voorhis (2001) studied students in six classes who received homework intervention strategies (TIPS) and students in four classes who did not receive homework intervention strategies. She also found a strong correlation between improved student achievement and parent involvement.

Epstein, J. L., Simon, B. S., & Salinas, K. C. (1997). Involving parents in homework in the middle grades. *Research Bulletin, 19*, 4.

Van Voorhis, F. L. (2001). Interactive science homework: An experiment in home and school connection. *NASSP Bulletin, 85*(627), 20-32. www.pdkintl.org/edres/resbul18.htm.

Find Research Related to This Strategy

You can find more information and research on this topic by searching the National Center for Family and Community Connections resource Web page, The Connection Collection: School-Family-Community Publications Database, at www.sedl.org/connections/resources/. If you are looking for information about involving family in learning outside of school, useful keywords to help narrow your search are **homework**, **achievement**, and **standards**.



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