

Superintendent's Thoughts Is Parent Involvement Passé'

A White Paper

Research shows that parental involvement in a child's education is a strong predictor of student achievement. Typically, the more involved the parent, the better off the child. I have worked in rich districts, poor districts, middle income districts, racially diverse and racially homogeneous groups. I have never met a parent that didn't want the best for his or her child. That is not to say that there is agreement about how to go about it, but who doesn't want their child to succeed? Conversely, I have never met a teacher who didn't want to have a strong partnership with their students' parents.

Perhaps one of our biggest hurdles today as it relates to parental involvement is having an understanding about what it means to be involved. I think in many instances parents and teachers have two very different views. Parents often think that being involved means coming to school for every PTO meeting and winter and spring concerts. The truth is teachers want parents to be partners in education by holding their children accountable, asking the right questions about teaching and learning and realizing that teachers want to make learning meaningful and fun.

Gone are the days when mom and dad can volunteer to be class parents. Sure it still happens in some communities but the vast majority of children come from homes where both parents work and in some communities where students come from single female heads of household, mom often has to work two jobs to make ends meet.

However, there are things parents can do to get involved. Perhaps involvement is passé and we need to use a more

contemporary terminology. Maybe what schools really need is parental engagement.

Of course, educators want to see parents in school and at events and where possible parents should make time to be present. But what schools really need is for parents to hold their children accountable for their own learning. Schools need parents who will take the time to ask teachers, "What are your expectations of my son or daughter and how can I help him/her meet your expectations?" And parents should be able to communicate specifics about their child to the teacher. "Here are some facts about my child. He doesn't really like to read but if you can steer him toward books about sports or cars you may have better luck with keeping him focused." Or, "We're having some family problems right now, so if you notice any behavior that is out the ordinary would you please let me know?" Conversations like these help to build partnerships.

This is very different from the teacher calling you and saying, "I noticed Johnnie can't read. Haven't you taken the time to teach him anything at home?"

The ultimate goal of parental involvement is to help parents assume the responsibility of advocating for and supporting their children's education. Schools are not blameless in the current trend. One of the reasons for the lack of parental involvement is the lack of understanding of nontraditional families on the part of the school system. The nontraditional family is struggling to deal with many factors that affect every member of the family. These can definitely affect the way that the family is able to be involved in their student's education. More than likely, there is a shortage of time. There just simply are not enough hours in the day to accomplish everything. If there has been a divorce or death in the family, there probably has been a change in the financial standing of the family. If schools are not sensitive to this change, the

student/family could be organizationally alienated. The definition of the family structure is drastically different than it was only a few years ago. Parents may be doing the very best that they can.

Schools must understand that lack of participation as defined by some is not indicative of a parent's lack of interest or dereliction of duty. Parents may often feel that they are not welcomed at school. They may feel that what they may have to offer is unimportant and unappreciated. This is especially true when parents do not have a great deal of education themselves.

In some instances, parents may have had a bad experience with school which resulted in bad feelings or hostility and this may be a barrier to effective parental engagement.

Solutions

There are many things that can be done to improve parental involvement and the principal has to be seen as the person who will drive this improvement effort. For one, schools have to be sensitive to the circumstances of nontraditional families and develop systems for working around these conditions. One thing that the school can do is to let the parents handle parenting responsibilities and the school must handle the educational responsibilities. Also, by working with the parents more, the school will have a better idea of what the parents can and cannot do.

Single parents often do not have the time, money, or knowledge to help children with projects. For example, many mothers do not have equipment or the skill to plan science fair experiments or construct woodworking projects, and fathers may not be able to help design and sew costumes for the school play.

Another important item is communication. More communication between the school and home are needed, but specific types of communication are important. Two-way informal exchanges between teacher/parent are much more effective than one-way communication from the teacher (Wanat). Also, friendly contact should be established with parents early in the year before something has happened that makes it necessary for the teacher to contact the parent.

There are many ways that a school can improve communications. One way is for the school to sponsor a parent/student fund raiser. Parents and students working side-by-side gives them a chance to talk, and hopefully the teachers and schools will also be included in this important exchange.

Another avenue sometimes overlooked is inviting parents to volunteer. By doing this, the school is letting them know that they are wanted, needed, and welcomed at the school. Many parents are more than willing to share their knowledge of occupations, foreign travel, special skills and hobbies. They just want to be asked. Alumni events have been shown to be an excellent way to improve parent/community involvement.

Former students may appreciate the opportunity to return something to their school. One popular program is parent classes, which can help parents with parenting ideas/problems, homework/tutoring strategies, drug education, and improving communications skills. These classes can help the parent, student, and school.

An open house program at school can bring in parents, and it is very important to greet these visiting parents face-to-face as quickly as possible. Also, greeting visitors with a sign in their own language can make a big impression. Find out the languages spoken by students and parents and put up a sign with all

languages on it. Another way to help parents feel genuinely wanted and welcomed is to establish parent advisory groups.

People like to know that their input is valued. Also, the school could set up a parent center in the school stocked with resources to help parents. This is one way the school can say we care. In addition, the school could recognize what parents are doing to help the students and praise them for their efforts. People like to know that someone takes the time to notice and appreciate what they were doing (Wherry, 1992).

One very important way that parents can become involved in their student's work is through the use of computers. This is a new world opening up for a lot of students as well as their parents. They can learn about this exciting world together. One thing that is necessary is to make sure the programs used are at the correct grade level and that there is a lot of variety (Rickelman & Henk, 1991).

Some things won't work in some communities. There are several things that have been suggested for populations that are at-risk. These populations have a great number of uneducated people, drug addicts and alcoholics. The ideas already presented may not work for this sector of the population, and they may need special consideration. The first thing the school can do is to meet the parents where they are by assessing the parent's needs and providing programs to meet those needs. Having a workshop on Good Parenting Skills in English simply will not work when offered in a district in which Spanish is the main language spoken. The school will need to make a greater effort to get to know the parents individually. Also, the school should "offer a broad range of activities to encourage support and participation, including non-threatening, low-commitment opportunities". Making the parents feel as comfortable as possible is an important step.

Summary and Conclusion

"Do parents know how and what they can do to ensure their children's success? Do they understand how the school and home can work in harmony for the good of both? Some things that principals and teachers can do to help remove barriers to parental engagement are:

1. Stress the importance of parent-school partnerships.
2. Be sure the school welcomes and embraces diversity.
3. Schedule meetings and times and places that are conducive to working parents.
4. Be mindful that many children are raised in single female homes or with grandparents.
5. Be sure not to pass judgment on parents who may not be able to attend school events.
6. Provide alternatives for parents to be able to see student performances or exhibits.
7. Offer parents an opportunity to share their own experiences (e.g. career, vacations, language, culture, etc.)
8. Train teachers on ways to diffuse and communicate.
9. Have expectations for parental engagement and communicate those expectations to parents early.
10. Encourage teachers to make contact with parents to establish a rapport before contacting them to discuss problems.