



Family Strengthening Policy Center

A Program of the National Human Services Assembly

Policy Brief No. 3

Parental Involvement in Education

This paper, one of a series of periodic briefs produced by the Family Strengthening Policy Center, seeks to describe a new way of thinking about families raising children in low income communities and, importantly, how this new way of thinking can and should influence policy. The premise of family strengthening, in this context and as championed by the Annie E. Casey Foundation, is that children do well when cared for by supportive families, which, in turn, do better when they live in vital and supportive communities. This and other briefs in the series describe ways in which enhancing connections within families and between families and the institutions that affect them result in better outcomes for children *and* their families. For more information about the concept of family strengthening, see Policy Brief No. 1, "Introduction to Family Strengthening."

The Family Strengthening Policy Center is a program of the National Human Services Assembly, an association of leading national nonprofit health, human service, human and community development agencies. The Center is funded by the Annie E. Casey Foundation.

Enhancing connections within families, between families, their communities and the institutions that affect them results in better outcomes for children *and* their families. Family and community involvement that is linked to student learning has a greater effect on achievement than more general forms of involvement. This brief seeks to describe the role parental involvement in education has on child well being in low income communities. While the focus is on parental involvement in education, lessons learned can and should be applied to other fields serving children and families. The premise of family strengthening, in this context and as championed by the Annie E. Casey Foundation, is that children do well when cared for by supportive families, which, in turn, do better when they live in vital and supportive communities. Aside from highlighting emerging practices in the field, this brief will examine the role parental involvement plays in family driven community development and propose policy recommendations for taking this practice to scale.

Parental Involvement: Definition

There is no universal definition of what parental involvement entails. Some definitions include greater participation in the life of a school, while others focus on increased contributions to an individual child's learning process. Still others incorporate the family into the learning process through adult education, parenting, and after school activities. Some leading schools engage families in the governance and planning processes and in building broad ownership of student achievement goals. Nonetheless, parental involvement occurs when parents actively, critically, resourcefully and responsibly contribute to promoting and developing the well being of their communities (Family Support America, 2001).

Research

Kathleen Hoover-Dempsey and Howard Sandler found that parents' "ideas about child development and appropriate roles in supporting children's education at home influence parents' decisions about how to be involved in their children's education" (Henderson, A.T., & Mapp, K.L., 2002, p.122). Furthermore, when parents believe that involvement can have a positive influence on their child's education, it can positively influence children's educational outcomes (Henderson, A.T., & Mapp, K.L., 2002). A study conducted by Mapp and Henderson examined the factors that influence low income parents' involvement. They found that "social factors emanating from the parents' own experiences and history influence their participation" (Henderson, A.T., & Mapp, K.L., 2002, p.141). These factors include parents' own educational experiences in school and their beliefs about family involvement as shaped by cultural norms and values, and the burden of their additional responsibilities (Henderson, A.T., & Mapp, K.L., 2002). The study suggests that when school staff engage in caring and trustful relationships with parents and recognize them as partners in the educational development of children, parents' desire to be involved is influenced and how they participate in their children's educational development is influenced. (Henderson, A.T., & Mapp, K.L., 2002).

Another study by Westat and Policy Studies Associates found that outreach to parents of low achieving students resulted in long term benefits for all students' reading achievement and the mathematics achievement of low-achieving students (Henderson, A.T., & Mapp, K.L., 2002). Finally, a study of the Parent Institute for Quality Education showed that after participation in parent information classes, parents indicated that they could initiate contact with their child's school and did not have to wait for the teacher to extend an invitation (Henderson, A.T., & Mapp, K.L., 2002). How parents perceive the school invitations, demands and opportunities for parent involvement are key factors that influence parental involvement (Henderson, A.T., & Mapp, K.L., 2002).

Benefits of Parental Involvement

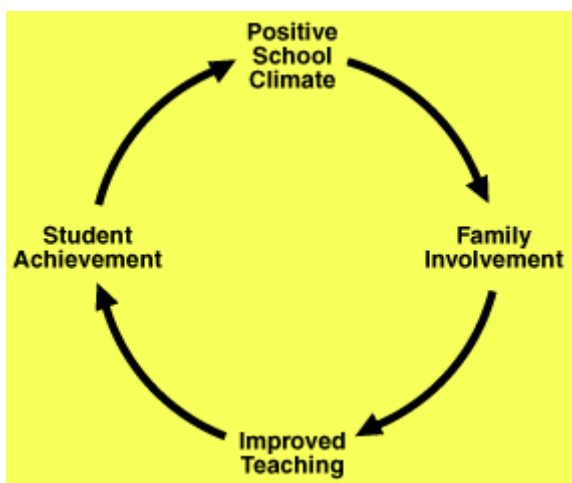
Besides student success, parental involvement produces other benefits as well.

Benefits for students (Henderson, A.T. & Berla, N., 1994)

1. Higher grades and test scores
2. Higher achievement in reading
3. Better attendance and more homework done
4. Higher graduation rates
5. Greater enrollment in post-secondary education
6. Students exhibit more positive attitudes and behavior
7. Negative student behaviors, such as alcohol use, violence, and antisocial behavior decrease as parent involvement increases

Benefits for parents

1. More confidence in the school
2. Greater confidence in themselves as parents and in their ability to help their children at home (Wherry, J. H., 2003).
3. Greater likelihood that the parents will enroll in continuing education to advance their own schooling (Wherry, J. H., 2003).



(National Central Regional Educational Library, 2004).

4. Ability to make contacts and build social networks that they can use to create opportunities for their children and themselves.
5. Develop closer ties to their communities and neighbors.
6. Learn how to influence decisions made in their schools and communities (Henderson, A.T. & Berla, N., 1994).

Benefits for school quality (Henderson, A.T. & Berla, N., 1994)

1. More support from families
2. Schools that work well with families have improved teacher morale and higher ratings of teachers by parents.
3. School programs that involve parents outperform identical programs without parent and family involvement
4. Schools where children are failing improve dramatically when parents are enabled to become effective partners in their child's education

Benefits for families and communities

By defining the resources and opportunities that families need to succeed and promoting the development of healthy and successful children, the FSPC has identified three core areas essential to strengthen families:

- **Family Economic Success:** Family self-sufficiency improves through expanded opportunities to work, earning a living wage that provides for the basic needs of the family, and building assets that grow with the family over time, such as homeownership and retirement accounts.
- **Family Support Systems:** Building appropriate and adequate systems of support for healthy family development that encompasses health, child care, education, and other essential components of strong families is critical to build the infrastructure in which family success is possible.
- **Thriving and Nurturing Communities:** Building a nurturing and supportive environment in which healthy families can pursue long-term goals is critical to sustainable family development. Essential components for family success include access to affordable housing, strong neighborhood institutions, safe streets, supportive social networks, and an environment that promotes community and strengthens bonds between families.

In this context, parental involvement programs in schools reflect the family strengthening criteria of being family focused; that is, services intentionally address the needs of the family as a whole rather than serving only individuals. Initiatives are structured to

engage and support the entire family. It is a common sense approach to ensure that families get the resources they need to raise safe and healthy children, and it communicates a philosophy that families are producers, consumers, and disseminators of knowledge (Family Support America, 2004). In addition, central to the family strengthening approach, as well as parental involvement approaches, is the idea that family is the most fundamental factor influencing the lives and outcomes of children.

Parental involvement occurs when parents play active roles in the decisions that shape life for their families and communities, which, in turn, forms an important basis for the principles of family support practice. As parents become more active participants in their children's education, they develop their own leadership capacity. Finally, involved parents can build interdependent relationships with multiple stakeholders, and other family-focused agencies and systems that seek to enhance the quality of life for families and children (Family Support America, 2004).

Family-School-Community Partnerships

A comprehensive school-wide approach to parent involvement and partnership building is more likely than individual teachers' efforts to have the greatest impact on student learning (Wherry, J.H., 2003). When schools build partnerships with families that respond to their concerns, honor their contributions, and share their power, they succeed in sustaining connections that are aimed at improving student achievement. And when families and communities organize to hold poorly performing schools accountable, school districts make positive changes in policy, practice and resources (Henderson, A. & Berla, N, 1994).

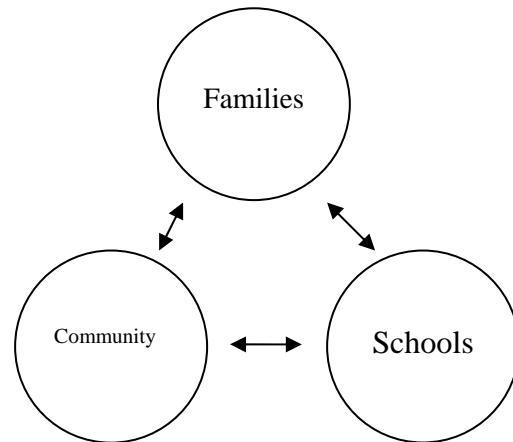
Communities offer a wide range of resources that are valuable to schools and the families they serve. These resources include people who volunteer their time in the school, organizations that offer enrichment opportunities, businesses that offer career-related information and workplace experiences, and agencies that provide various social services for students and families. (North Central Regional Educational Laboratory, 2004).

The following examples highlight reciprocal relationships that may form among schools, communities, and families.

Schools ↔ Communities - Schools can form partnerships with community and faith-based organizations to engage low income families. For example, social gatherings might take place outside the school at a faith-based or community center. Schools can become the center of the community by allowing use of school facilities and equipment for community members (National Coalition for Parent Involvement in Education, 2004).

Schools ↔ Families - Schools can offer the use of facilities to support the following learning activities: GED preparation, literacy instruction, basic adult education, job training, continuing education, child development instruction, and parenting education. Families can support schools by becoming classroom aides and tutors as well as volunteers in the lunchroom, health clinic or in the front office (National Coalition for Parent Involvement in Education, 2004).

Communities ↔ Families – Engaging students in community service and service learning activities helps them learn about community assets and building social networks in the community (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2004)



Family Involvement in Education – The Challenge

While a majority of parents indicate a desire to become more involved, the competing demands of work, transportation and child care create challenges and hamper efforts for substantial involvement. Employers must be encouraged to allow employees paid time off to visit and volunteer at school. For parents to take on leadership roles, a social infrastructure must be created to build and sustain programs in which parents are encouraged to participate in the governance, planning, implementing, and evaluation of programs (Family Support America, 2004).

From the schools' perspective, there are also a number of challenges in engaging families in the school environment. Schools may view the parents as external to the learning environment, resulting in resistance to parent involvement by some educators. Some schools struggle to create a welcoming environment for parents and fail to accommodate the schedules of working parents. Finally, many schools must work hard to overcome the particular challenges associated with engaging parents of non-English speaking children by finding new ways to accommodate varying backgrounds and cultures.

Many of these challenges may be overcome by effective outreach practices such as meeting face to face; providing multilingual materials; sending learning materials home; and keeping in touch about progress. As described earlier, when schools build partnerships with families that respond to their concerns, honor their contributions and share power, they are sustaining connections that are aimed at improving student achievement.

Practices from the Field

The following initiatives highlight examples of parental involvement integrated into human service programming.

National PTA Standards for Parent/Family Involvement Programs

According to the National Parent Teacher Association, the overall importance of parent and family involvement, as the foundation for all other education reforms, warrants the same consideration and attention as other areas for which national standards are being developed. The following standards proposed by the National PTA are guidelines for evaluating the quality and effectiveness of programs that serve parents and families.

- Standard I:** Communicating—Communication between home and school is regular, two-way, and meaningful.
- Standard II:** Parenting—Parenting skills are promoted and supported.
- Standard III:** Student Learning—Parents play an integral role in assisting student learning.
- Standard IV:** Volunteering—Parents are welcome in the school, and their support and assistance are sought.
- Standard V:** School Decision Making and Advocacy—Parents are full partners in the decisions that affect children and families.
- Standard VI:** Collaborating with Community—Community resources are used to strengthen schools, families, and student learning.

The Right Question Project

The Right Question Project (RQP) is a small, nonprofit organization that promotes parent and community involvement in schools by building parents' skills to effectively support, monitor, and advocate for their children's education. RQP works primarily with low- and moderate-income communities that historically have been marginalized from the educational process.

The Right Question Project believes that parents must be able to ask the "right questions" to be active partners in their children's education. This is the primary skill that the organization helps parents acquire. Rather than giving parents a checklist of questions, RQP helps parents identify issues that are important to them and develop *their own* questions. The practice of formulating questions is a centerpiece in helping parents to prioritize their issues and build effective communication skills.

National Coalition for Parent Involvement in Education (NCPIE)

The National Coalition for Parent Involvement in Education (NCPIE) was founded in 1980 to develop and strengthen partnerships between families and schools. NCPIE serves as a visible representative for strong parent and family involvement initiatives at the national level. It conducts activities that involve the coalition's member organizations and their affiliates and constituencies in efforts to increase family involvement. In addition, NCPIE provides resources and legislative information that can help member organizations promote parent and family involvement.

Community Involvement Program (CIP)

The Institute for Education and Social Policy (IESP) at New York University supports parents as community organizers in New York City through its Community Involvement Program (CIP). Efforts focus on two interconnected areas: supporting specific neighborhood based organizing groups and convening organizing groups to work in concert on common issues. In neighborhood based work, CIP helps community based organizations develop their capacity to lead school improvement campaigns in their neighborhoods. Support includes: training on schooling issues and strategies for organizing and developing community leadership; consultation on developing strategies

and internal capacity to carry out the organizing work; brokering relationships to other sources of information and support; and assessment and feedback on progress, barriers and overall strategy (Jacob, A. et al, 2004).

Parents as Teachers (PAT)

Parents as Teachers (PAT) is an international early childhood parent education and family support program serving families throughout pregnancy until their child enters kindergarten. The program is designed to enhance child development and school achievement through parent education that is universally accessible to all families. .

Parent Institute for Quality Education (PIQE)

PIQE works to encourage and support low-income ethnically diverse parents of elementary, middle and high school children to take a participatory role in assisting their children to create a home learning environment; navigate the school system; collaborate with teachers, counselors and principals; and encourage college attendance. PIQE offers a training curriculum for parents in the areas of Home/School collaboration and How the School System Functions.

The Family Involvement Network of Educators (FINE)

The Family Involvement Network of Educators (FINE) is a national network of over 2,500 people who are interested in promoting strong partnerships between children's educators, their families, and their communities. FINE's membership is composed of faculty in higher education, school professionals, directors and trainers of community based and national organizations, parent leaders, and graduate students. FINE was launched in November 2000 by Harvard Family Research Project to serve as a hub of resources for family engagement in children's education, and to enable colleagues in the field to connect and communicate.

Parent Information Resource Centers (PIRCs)

The U.S. Department of Education created the first PIRCs in 1995 to provide parents, schools and organizations working with families with training, information, and technical assistance to understand how children develop and what they need to succeed in school. Today, more than 70 PIRCs operate in almost all fifty states across the nation. They work closely with parents, educators and community organizations to strengthen partnerships so that children can reach high academic standards.

Federal Initiatives

Parental rights, responsibilities, and opportunities under Title III of the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) includes a School Parental Involvement Policy which states that any school district receiving funds “must implement programs, activities, and procedures involving parents in programs” (North Central Regional Educational Laboratory, 2004). Schools may use NCLB funds for parent training to understand standards and assessments; transportation and child care for parents and classes for parents who speak English as a second language (North Central Regional Educational Laboratory, 2004).

Parent involvement under NCLB specifies information parents are entitled to as well. For example, parents have a right to see information about teacher qualifications as well as a right to receive a report of how their child performed on the state's academic achievement test. The legislation's provisions put an emphasis on developing place-based models in family focused education, highlighting the need for broad-based community coalitions to be involved in crafting local policy from the earliest planning stages.

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) requires the involvement of parents of children with disabilities in the development of their individualized education programs (IEP) (American Youth Policy Forum). In addition, Title I federal funds, aimed at helping economically disadvantaged children meet challenging academic standards, require schools to develop effective family involvement programs. School-parent compacts, for example, are written agreements of shared responsibility that must be developed with parents of students participating in such programs. These compacts define school and parent goals for student achievement, outline each stakeholder's role in achieving those goals, and require effective communication skills by school personnel.

Policy recommendations

What states can do to promote parental involvement

- Develop a state-wide network to support teacher preparation for family involvement.
- Provide technical assistance to local districts and schools on how to involve parents.
- Review each district's application for Title I funds to determine if it complies with the law. The law states that the application must describe how the district will train teachers to involve parents in their child's education and assist schools to develop parent involvement plans and activities (Henderson, A.T., 2002).

What school districts can do to promote parental involvement

- Parent involvement programs must have a written policy for administrative support and training for staff, parents and community members.
- Programs should reach out to parents without requiring them to come to school.
- Make family involvement training available to elementary, middle and high school teachers. Sustain teachers' knowledge, skills, and positive attitudes toward families through in-service training.
- Develop a family involvement policy--a school's written commitment to develop local partnerships with families and the community.
- Evaluate the content and effectiveness of the parent involvement policy each year in consultation with parents.
- Engage parents in educating teachers, school staff and principals on how to reach out, communicate and work with parents as equal partners.
- Give parents a voice in decisions, particularly those regarding their children's schooling (Department of Education, 1994).

What communities can do to promote parental involvement

- Members of the community and local businesses can support family involvement by broadening the learning environment. Volunteers can assist in the schools either for special events or on a regular basis through tutoring or mentoring (Department of Education, 1994).
- Make community resources available to schools and families. Community organizations may reach out to families by providing services such as child care and after school programs (Department of Education, 1994).
- Support flexible scheduling time at work and special programs so parents can participate in their children's schooling (Department of Education, 1994).
- Advocate with state education agencies and school districts to promote widespread and effective parent involvement policies and practices.

RESOURCES

Child Trends Databank

A one-stop-shop for the latest national trends and research on over 80 key indicators of child and youth well being.

<http://www.childtrends.databank.org/indicators/39ParentalInvolvementinSchools.cfm>

The Family Involvement Network of Educators (FINE)

FINE was launched in November 2000 by Harvard Family Research Project to serve as a hub of resources for family engagement in children's education, and to enable colleagues in the field to connect and communicate. It offers the following resources online: monthly announcements of current ideas and new resources; research, evaluation, and training tools; e-newsletter; (*FINE Forum*) with program models and perspectives on family involvement; member insights, and opinions about topics of interest.

<http://www.gse.harvard.edu/hfrp/projects/fine.html>

Institute for Responsive Education

The Institute for Responsive Education (IRE) is a research, policy, and advocacy organization that encourages and supports school, family, and community partnerships to enable high quality educational opportunities for all children. IRE has developed an action research and training methodology based on three decades of work in the field.

www.responsiveeducation.org

KIPP program

KIPP is a national nonprofit organization that recruits, trains and supports outstanding educators to open and run high performing college preparatory public schools in educationally underserved communities. Website features KIPP School Leadership Program.

<http://www.kipp.org>

Parent Information and Resource Center

The U.S. Department of Education created the first PIRCs in 1995 to provide parents, schools and organizations working with families with training, information, and technical assistance to understand how children develop and what they need to succeed in school. Today, more than 70 PIRCs operate in almost 50 states, working closely with parents, educators and community organizations to strengthen partnerships so that children can reach high academic standards.

<http://www.pirc-info.net/index.asp>

Parent Institute for Quality Education

To encourage and support low income, ethnically diverse parents of elementary, middle and high school children to take a participatory role in assisting their children to create a home learning environment; navigate the school system; collaborate with teachers, counselors and principals; encourage college attendance; and support a child's emotional and social development.

www.piqe.org

Parents as Teachers National Center

Parents as Teachers (PAT) is an international early childhood parent education and family support program serving families throughout pregnancy until their child enters

kindergarten. The program is designed to enhance child development and school achievement through parent education that is universally accessible to all families.
www.patnc.org

Partnership for Family Involvement in Education
<http://pfie.ed.gov/>

The National Parent Teacher Association

National PTA, the largest volunteer child advocacy organization in the United States, is a nonprofit association of parents, educators, students, and other citizens active in their schools and communities. Website features legislative information and ideas for parental involvement.

www.pta.org

National Coalition for Parent Involvement in Education (NCPIE)

NCPIE advocates for the involvement of parents and families in their children's education, and to foster relationships between home, school, and community to enhance the education of all our nation's young people.

<http://www.ncpie.org/>

No Child Left Behind (NCLB)

The website highlights all facets of (NCLB) including accountability for results; an emphasis on doing what works based on scientific research; expanded parental options; and expanded local control and flexibility.

<http://www.ed.gov/nclb/landing.jhtml?src=pb>

The Right Question Project

The Right Question Project (RQP) is a nonprofit that offers an effective, easy-to-use educational strategy and a clear vision of how to build a more democratic society. They are promoting a vision in which encounters with outposts of government become opportunities to act democratically and have democratic experiences. Their website contains information on their educational strategy and their RQP network.

<http://www.rightquestion.org/>

Strengthening Families/Strengthening Schools Toolkit

The *Strengthening Families, Strengthening Schools* tool kit includes information and resources to help schools and families work together – to strengthen families, strengthen schools, and help children do better. The toolkit was developed for the Annie E. Casey Foundation's work in Making Connections Communities.

<http://www.aecf.org/initiatives/mc/sf/index.htm>

U.S. Department of Education

www.ed.gov

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Advancing a Place-Based, Practice-Driven, Family Strengthening Policy Agenda