

Moving Forward: Ideas for Research on School, Family, and Community Partnerships

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If family involvement is important for student success, as decades of studies indicate, then we must address a harder, but more difficult question: *How can more families – indeed, all families – become involved in their children’s education in ways that contribute to student success?*

Studies for over twenty-five years have set a firm base on which to build new research and to design more effective programs and practices of school, family, and community partnerships. Extant studies confirm that parents care about their children, but need good, clear information from educators in order to remain involved in their children’s education from preschool through high school. The research has produced a useful theory and framework of six types of involvement that are guiding research, policy, and practice. Researchers have begun to inspect, dissect, and identify components and effects of partnership programs in schools and school districts.

Despite the difficulties of studying schools, families, and communities simultaneously, it is necessary for researchers to “think new” about how students learn and develop as they progress from preschool through high school. It also is necessary for educators to “think new” about the communications, connections, and coordinated actions that they must conduct with families and community partners to help more students – indeed, all students – succeed to their full potential. Well-documented problems with student achievement, motivation, attitudes about education, school behavior, and future plans are partly due to “old think” that separates school and students from home and community, leaving teachers to work in isolation from other influential people in children’s lives.

A new chapter by Epstein and Sheldon (2006) discusses seven principles that have emerged from my and colleagues’ research and field work with over 1000 schools, 125 school districts, and other state and organizational partners in the National Network of Partnership Schools (NNPS) at Johns Hopkins University. These principles should help researchers frame better questions and apply more rigorous methods to study partnerships, and help educators, parents, and community partners to work better together to support student success.

1. ***School, family, and community partnerships is a better term than parental involvement*** to recognize that parents, educators, and others in the community share responsibility for students’ learning and development. The theory of “overlapping spheres of influence” (Epstein, 2001) improves our depiction of how home, school, and community affect children’s education and development. Theory-driven studies are needed that include measures of the multiple major contexts of students’ lives.
2. **School, family, and community partnerships is a multidimensional concept.** A framework of six types of involvement guides the development of comprehensive partnership programs (Epstein, 2001; Epstein, et al., 2002). Each type of involvement raises key challenges that must be solved to reach all families and produce positive results. This requires focused and subject-specific measures of partnership practices, and not overly-general or superficial measures of parental involvement.
3. **A program of school, family, and community partnerships is an essential component of school and classroom organization.** Studies need to include measures of schools’ actions to implement partnership programs and activities that reach out to involve all parents, not only parents’ self-initiated actions. In policy and practice, this links family and community involvement directly to the school improvement planning process.

4. **Programs of school, family, and community partnerships require multi-level leadership.** Districts and states have leadership roles to play in guiding schools to strengthen and sustain programs of family and community involvement (Epstein, in press; Sheldon, 2005, in press). Researchers can use methods of multi-level analyses, for example, to study the independent contributions and connections of district leaders' support and schools' actions to develop their partnership programs.
5. **Programs of school, family, and community partnerships must include a focus on increasing student learning and development.** When plans for partnerships are linked to school goals for student success, family and community involvement can measurably affect students' learning and development (Epstein, 2001, Sheldon, 2003). This requires measures that assess the quality of program implementation, interim outcomes (e.g., parents' responses), and ultimate outcomes of student achievement, attendance, behavior, health, and other indicators of success. Schools want students to develop academically, socially, emotionally, and physically at each age and grade level; families and communities can help students attain these healthy outcomes.
6. **All programs of school, family, and community partnerships are about equity.**
7. **Methods** of research on school, family, and community partnerships must continue to improve. This includes longitudinal data that accounts for schools and students' "starting points," matching samples for comparative analyses, path analyses, and multi-level analyses to understand influences on more equitable outreach and involvement. It is important for new studies to attack particularly challenging measurement issues such as isolating the effects of partnerships on student outcomes from other simultaneously occurring school improvements and explaining initially negative associations of some kinds of parental involvement with low student achievement and poor behavior that are undertaken to help resolve those very problems.

The sixth principle – equity – is pivotal for learning how to develop and sustain partnership programs that provide more equal opportunities for all families to become involved in ways that support all students' progress and success in school. It is imperative for researchers to design studies that go beyond documenting inequities to identify programs and practices that promote greater equity in the involvement of diverse families and greater equality of effects for students. It is also imperative for educators to know that programs of family and community involvement can be planned, implemented, evaluated, and improved from year to year.

All seven principles must guide new research and programs of school, family, and community partnerships at the preschool, elementary, middle, and high school levels. By thinking in new ways about school, family, and community partnerships, researchers will continue to increase knowledge about partnerships and educators will improve policy and practice.

Selected References. See the full chapter in the SAGE *Handbook* for a complete list of over 100 references by many researchers on school, family, and community partnerships.

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