

Family-School-Community Partnerships

What Does the Research Say?

The Benefits of Partnerships

On Student Achievement

Involved families help children

- earn higher grades and test scores and enroll in higher-level programs, *regardless of family income and background*
- be promoted, pass their classes, and earn credits
- attend school regularly
- have better social skills, better behavior, and adapt well to school
- graduate from high school and go on to post-secondary education.

On Schools and Staff

A program of family involvement

- helps increase student performance school-wide K-12
- especially benefits children from disadvantaged backgrounds
- provides the support needed for families of all backgrounds to be involved
- allows families to directly assist student learning and success
- increases teacher morale and performance.

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Developing School Partnership Programs

Research shows that partnerships should look and feel different at every school. Effective partnerships

- involve families from the start in designing and planning activities that help children learn and meet school goals
- respond to families' needs and incorporate their interests and ideas into what and how things are done
- make clear, frequent, two-way communications between home and school a constant
- are customized, comprehensive, and continually improved to help meet important goals for students.

1. Families of all backgrounds help their children learn.

Studies suggest that all families are engaged in supporting their children's education at *home*, regardless of their income, educational level, or cultural background.

Children in all families benefit when their families

- verbally encourage them to do well in school,
- monitor or help them with homework,
- take them to community events and places in the community that encourage learning, such as libraries and museums, and
- involve extended family members or friends in their learning, care, and well-being.

White, middle-class families tend to be more involved *at school* than other families.

Key Questions to Explore

- Do teachers recognize the contributions all families make to children's learning at home?
- How can we build upon the contributions all families make to close achievement gaps?
- How can our school support the involvement of more families at school and home?

Ideas for Schools

- **Survey families about what they need help understanding or doing to support children's learning.** Do parents understand what report cards and state tests show, as well as how they connect to the curriculum? Let parents of high school students know what tools are available to help them plan for graduation and beyond.
- **Invite parents and children to learn together.** At Family Math Night, children and parents can learn skill-building math games to play at home. Sponsor a family field for elementary-aged trip to a local nature center
- **Invite students and parents to explore, with staff, how to address concerns.** Whether the issue is bullying, busing, or the budget, concerns will be effectively addressed if parents and students have a chance to directly comment on and work out solutions.

2. Schools must reach out if all families are to get involved.

The research clearly shows that *unless* schools reach out to *all* families, many won't be involved. The special efforts schools make to involve families determine whether, how, and which families are involved.

For example, schools successful at involving families from diverse backgrounds focus on three priorities. They

1. build trust and collaborative relationships among families and staff
2. recognize, respect, and address families' needs
3. share power and responsibility with families.

Studies find that when parents have a sense of confidence and power, or efficacy, their children do better in school.

Key Questions to Explore

- What families are not involved in our school? Why not?
- How can we welcome and engage all families no matter where they live or their language or culture?
- How can we work with the community to help families meet basic needs for food, clothing, employment, and safety?
- How can we develop families' sense of confidence and train parent leaders from all racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic groups in our school?

Ideas for Schools

- **Create a group for parents and family members of the same culture** – for example, a Hmong or Hispanic parent group – to help families develop comfortable, trusting relationships with each other and school staff. Designate a liaison with your school's larger parent group.
- **Plan activities and events throughout the school year** that bring parents and staff in personal contact and let them get to know one another.

- **Develop families' sense of confidence and power** by brainstorming with families ways they can and want to be involved. Offer a wide variety of opportunities and levels of involvement so everyone can be involved, then recognize that involvement, including parents' involvement with their own children.

3. Partnerships linked to learning can boost student achievement.

Schools that link student learning goals to subject-specific partnership practices with families and community members can improve student achievement, especially when they

- **Focus on specific ways for each subject and grade level that families can support children's learning.** Host Family Nights for math and reading to teach families activities they can do at home that enrich learning. Describe in the school newsletter simple, useful strategies parents can use at home to build skills.
- **Keep parents informed about school learning goals and what the school is doing to meet them.** Use parent nights and school newsletters to clearly spell out how the school is helping children meet learning goals in each grade level and related subject.
- **Make it easy for parents to meet** and discuss concerns with teachers, the principal, guidance counselors, or other school support staff, and to examine their children's records.
- **Use the annual school and district report cards** as a chance to have focused conversations with parents and community members about each school's strengths and areas needing improvement. Describe how teachers, parents, and community members can work together to make improvements.

Key Questions to Explore

- How has our school been successful in reaching out to and involving families in children's learning? How can we spread successful practices to other grade levels or subject areas?
- Which partnership practices directly contribute to student learning goals? Which practices can be changed or expanded to include more students and families?
- Ideally, how do we want family-school-community partnerships to work at this school three years from now? What support does our school's Partnership Action Team need to help achieve these goals?

Ideas for Schools

Match partnership practices to grade levels. Partnerships are important to student learning from pre-school through high school graduation. Design activities that take children's ages and developmental needs into account.

For families with young children, offer

- Home visits by trained parent educators of the same cultural background as families, or knowledge of their culture.
- Lending libraries that offer games and learning materials to build skills at home
- Discussion groups with other families about children's learning
- Classes on how to stimulate children's mental, physical, and emotional development.

For families of elementary and middle school students, offer

- Interactive homework that involves parents with their children's learning
- Workshops on topics parents suggest, such as building vocabulary, positive discipline, and safety issues

- Regular phone calls from teachers, not just when something is wrong, about how their children are doing in class
- Learning packets in reading, science, and math, with training in how to use them
- Meetings with teachers to talk about children's progress and what they're learning.

For families of high school students, offer

- regular meetings with teachers and counselors to plan their children's academic program
- information about program options, graduation requirements, test schedules, and post-secondary options and how to plan for them
- Information about where to find academic support, such as help with homework, tutoring, after-school programs, and special classes. Include subject areas covered and costs
- Explanations of courses students should take to be prepared for college or other post-secondary education
- Information about financing post-secondary education and applying for financial aid.

Ease transitions for students and families. Children of all ages do better when they feel comfortable and respected, feel that they belong at school, and feel supported by teachers. Research suggests that the following practices help students and families adjust as they enter a new school:

- offer families and students tours of the school and opportunities to visit and observe classrooms
- meet with students and families at the feeder schools or host a program to introduce staff, explain the school's programs, and answer questions.
- make home visits the summer before school starts to begin building a relationship with each family
- work with families to find out what they want to know for the next level of education and to help them plan for post-secondary education and a career.

4. Educate staff about partnerships to involve all families.

All school staff, from the principal to the custodian, benefit from opportunities to learn more about effectively working with families and the community.

Key Questions to Explore

- Do all staff understand the benefits of partnerships and how to work with families?
- Do staff have the administrative support and time needed to effectively involve families in their children's learning?
- Which students need more attention? How can school and community resources support families' efforts to help their children succeed in school?

Ideas for Schools

- Invite staff and parents to do action research on a school question or concern, gathering information, recommending action, and sharing what was learned.
- Invite families to attend staff development sessions. Devote time to small-group parent-teacher discussions around the topic.
- Explore how staff can build trusting, respectful relationships with families and benefit from involving families and community members in decision making.
- Share with after-school program staff and supplemental service providers, information about the curriculum, textbooks, teaching skills, and students' progress.