

Family Involvement to Promote Student Achievement

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**FAMILY INVOLVEMENT TO
PROMOTE STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT**

**A “Best Practices” Literature Review Prepared for
Achievement Plus, A Partnership for Community Schools**

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Researchers and practitioners have long acknowledged a strong link between parent involvement and children's success in school. Studies conducted over the last 30 years have identified a relationship between parent involvement and increased student achievement, enhanced self-esteem, improved behavior, and better school attendance. Research also shows that "what families do" to support children's learning accounted for more than "who families are" (e.g., socioeconomic status, parent educational level, ethnic background) in achievement variation (Walberg, 1984; White, 1982; Epstein, 1991; Christenson, Round, & Gorney, 1992). But despite this evidence, family involvement in schools throughout the United States remains minimal. For this literature review, we discuss the barriers to parent involvement, characteristics of parent involvement that are related to academic achievement, and strategies to increase parent involvement. We mainly focus on families of ethnically diverse elementary school students from urban, low-income or disadvantage backgrounds.

Barriers to parent involvement

We know parents, regardless of educational level, income status, or ethnic background, want their children to be successful in school. However, for families facing adverse conditions, such as poverty and lack of resources, there are obstacles for involvement at school as described below.

1. Cultural, racial, and economic differences between school staff and parents can lead to incorrect assumptions and stereotyping on both sides.

Schools might think that low-income parents are uninterested in their child's education. Schools expect parents to take responsibility for their children's educational success by preparing them for school, teaching basic skills, and reinforcing what goes on in the classroom. However, parents may believe that it is their duty to instill proper behavior in the child, and that it is the school's responsibility to impart knowledge. These parents may think the behavior expected of them by school is unwanted interference because they are uncertain as to what they could do to help their children learn (Goldenburg, 1987). On the other hand, research

has also shown, with Latino parents, that once parents are exposed to and participated in parent programs, their attitudes about parent involvement changed (Pappas, 1997). For non-English speaking parents, the inability to understand English is a major deterrent to their participation in school, as is the lack of knowledge about the school system (Pappas, 1997). Without understanding English, and therefore, not understanding the demands of the tasks sent home, non-English speaking parents face an additional obstacle in their effort to get involved in their child's learning at home.

2. Parents' work schedules, inadequate child care, and lack of transportation.

Eighty-seven percent of Title I principals reported that lack of time is a significant barrier to parent involvement (U.S. Department of Education, 1997). For low-income parents, child care and transportation are other obstacles to attending school functions and participating at schools (Liontos, 1991).

3. School staff's failure to recognize or legitimize parents' role in their children's education.

Teachers who have low expectations for at-risk children, or who believe that at-risk parents do not care about their children and do not want to be involved in their education, may contribute to children's failure (Liontos, 1991). Teachers need more guidance and information on how to collaborate with parents, as only a few universities and colleges prepare teachers to work with parents (Shartrand, Weiss, Kreider & Lopez, 1997). Lack of time on the part of school staff is also a barrier in pursuing active involvement of parents in schools (U.S. Department of Education, 1997).

4. Parents' negative experiences with schools and teachers/school staff.

Parents in inner-city environments may mistrust and often feel uncomfortable with the school environment (Menacker, Hurwitz, & Weldon, 1988). Negative feelings toward schools are often reinforced when schools communicate with parents only to share bad news about their children. Parents may also had negative experiences when they were in school themselves (Greenberg, 1989).

5 Narrow conceptualization of how families can be involved and lack of clarity about roles and responsibilities between families and educators.

Although the teacher is central for successful efforts, other educators, school psychologists, counselors, social workers, principals, home-school liaisons, etc., must be available to actively support family involvement in education. Similarly, our conceptualization of home must be stretched to include older siblings, extended family, and neighbors –someone who can serve as a primary contact for the schools (Weiss & Edwards, 1992). We also know that many parents are uncertain about how to help their children with schoolwork, how to support their children’s schooling, and what their role is in regard to their children’s education. Many parents said they would be willing to spend more time on activities with children if educators gave them more guidance (Epstein, 1991). Parents are in a better position to encourage home-learning activities if they understand what is expected of their child at school and are kept informed of specific steps they can take to support those expectations.

Characteristics of parent involvement that are related to academic achievement

There are many ways that parents can contribute to their child’s learning and academic success. In this section, we describe types of involvement that have been specifically linked to children’s academic achievement.

1. Realistic, high parent expectations for children’s school performance are associated with positive academic performance.

Research shows that: (a) parents’ verbal expectations for continued achievement and urging children to work hard in school are related to student achievement (Clark, 1988); (b) parents expectations for children to read and to learn math, and their expectations for verbal responses from their children are associated with better academic performance (Hess & Halloway, 1984); (c) parental knowledge of children’s current school work and school activities affects parents’ ability to set realistic expectations for children’s performance (Kellaghan, Sloane, Alvarez, & Bloom, 1993); (d) parent expectations of youth for post-secondary education are associated positively with academic performance (Clark, 1993); and (e) parents

expectations for deferral of immediate gratification to achieve long range goals are correlated with more successful school outcomes (Walberg, 1984).

2. **Children who come from home environments that support learning and provide structure tend to get higher grades and perform better on achievement tests.**

Parents encourage academic and intellectual pursuits by structuring children's time for homework completion, encouraging verbal conversations, modeling reading and learning, encouraging children to read at home, and limiting television viewing so the child can participate in other educational-related activities (Christenson, Rounds, & Gorney, 1992). Barton & Coley (1992) reported that student absenteeism, variety of reading materials at home, and amount of television watching – factors over which parents have some control – explain nearly 90% of the difference in performance between high-and low-achievers. Also, Clark (1990) found that high-achieving students in grades K-12 in an urban setting spent approximately 20 hours a week engaged in constructive learning activities outside of school.

3. **A positive parent-child relationship is related to academic success.**

A positive affective relationship between parents and children increases the likelihood that the child will initiate and persist in challenging intellectual tasks (Estrada, Arsenio, Hess, & Halloway, 1987) and be socially competent (Bretherton, 1985). Clark (1983) conducted an intensive study of 10 African-American students from poor homes, half of whom were successful academically and half of whom were not. The researchers discovered that parents of high-achieving students had distinct styles of interacting with their children. They created emotionally supportive home environments and provide reassurance when the youngsters encountered failure.

4. **Authoritative parenting is positively associated with student achievement.**

Parents who set clear standards, enforcing rules, encouraging discussion, negotiation, and independence (authoritative parenting) are more likely to have children with positive academic outcomes (Baumrind, 1966; Patterson, Capaldi, & Bank, 1992). In addition, children who described their parents as warm, democratic and firm are more likely than their peers to develop positive attitudes and beliefs about achievements,

and therefore, are more likely to do better in school (Steinberg, Elmen, & Mounts, 1989).

5. **Academic gains are the greatest when there is consistency between home and school.**

Parent involvement in home learning activities that support school instruction (e.g., reading to their child, encourage reading, setting aside time and a place for homework) is significantly correlated with academic outcomes for students (Thorkildsen & Stein, 1998). Title I students whose parents regularly attended school-based parent training and information workshops made significantly greater achievement gains in reading and math than children of noninvolved parents (Shaverand & Walls, 1998). Research also indicates that parents who are involved in home learning activities have positive communication with school and have a positive attitude toward school (Hannon, 1987). The consensus or continuity between home and school about the goal of education is a critical factor for children's academic success (Hess & Halloway, 1984). Hansen (1986) found that continuity in rules, expectations, and interaction styles resulted in academic achievement gains. Researchers concluded that the relationship between home and school and/or the degree to which students receive a consistent message about their school performance and progress may be the more important target for intervention (Christenson, 1996).

6. **Achievement gains are most significant and long-lasting when parent involvement begins at an early age.**

The most efficient time to set a child on a positive path is at young age (Finn, 1998). In addition, the opportunity for parents to stay intensively involved in school diminishes as students become increasingly independent and as peers come to have greater influence (Epstein, 1984).

Strategies to increase parent involvement

Research has shown that parents are more likely to be actively involved in their child's education if they perceive that schools have strong parent outreach programs. When parents believe that their child's teachers are doing many things to get them involved in

their child's education, they tend to become more involved in the educational process (Dauber & Esptein, 1993).

The League of Schools Project identified principles of an effective home-school partnership (Davies, 1991). They are, as follows:

- Every aspect of the school building and general climate is open, helpful, and friendly to parents. It is important to develop trust between school staff and parents.
- Communications with parents – whether about school policies and programs or about their own children – are frequent, clear, and two-way.
- Parents are treated by teachers as collaborators in the educational process. Parents' own knowledge, expertise, and resources are valued as essential to their child's success in school.
- The school recognizes its responsibility to forge a partnership with all families in the school, not simply those most easily available.
- The school principal and other administrators actively express in words and deeds the philosophy of partnership with all families.
- The school encourages volunteer support and help from all parents by providing a wide variety of volunteer opportunities including those that can be done from home and during non-work hours.
- The school provides opportunities for parents to meet their own needs for information, advice, and peer support.
- Parents' views and expertise are sought in developing policies and solving school-wide problems; in some schools parents are given important decision-making opportunities at a policy level.
- Schools recognize that they can best help parents provide a home environment conducive to children's learning if they facilitate their access to basic and supportive services.

Models for implementing school and family partnership

Successful programs (i.e., those that improve student performance) are comprehensive, well planned, and provide options for family involvement (which allows schools to be responsive to family diversity). In programs that are designed to be full partnerships,

student achievement not only can improve, it can reach levels that are standard for middle-class children (Comer & Haynes, 1991).

Epstein developed a model of school and family connection. Below are the five types of parent involvement in school and at home and strategies to increase parent involvement (Christenson et al, 1992). Not all activities are linked to the child's school performance. However research shows that parents who are involved in some of these activities tend also to be involved in others (Epstein and Dauber, 1991).

Type of Parent Involvement	What school staff can do
Basic support for child as learner Realistic expectations Effort attributions Provide structure for studying Positive verbal interaction Television use monitoring Positive emotional climate Authoritative discipline Discussing school work	Indirect service: Provide information on parenting skills, child development, grade level expectations, homework policies, and ways to build positive home learning conditions through printed materials, videotapes, workshops, parent support programs, and lending library. Direct service: Counsel parents about specific ways to support students' learning and behavior in school, make home visits, and conduct workshops on ways to maintain healthy child development and school success across grade levels
School-home communication Frequent communication with school. Valuing education Recognizing children's accomplishments	Indirect service: Develop frequent, efficient, and a variety of forms of communication that are understood by all parents (memos, good news phone calls, report card, conferences). Develop a structure for effective parent-teacher conference. Direct service: Meet with parents to explain school programs and children's progress. Develop unique communication strategies for nonliterate parents and communicate in parents' first language. Facilitate conferences and family-school meetings to develop interventions to improve child's school success and grades and create cooperative relationships between parents and educators.
Involvement at school Attending school functions Presence in school Volunteering in classroom	Indirect service: Organize parent volunteer program to assist teachers, administrators, and children in classrooms. Ensure that schools vary schedules so all families can participate as volunteers or audience. Direct service: Train volunteers to increase their effectiveness. Ensure that transportation and daycare are provided for families. Encourage parents to attend school performances or other events. Contact parents who do not attend scheduled conferences or need follow-up contacts.

Esptein’s model of school-family connection (continued)

<p>Involvement in learning activities at home</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Home reading activities Monitor homework Discuss books/school work Structure learning time Reinforce what children learn in school Provide opportunities to solve problems 	<p>Indirect service: Provide inservice training to teachers on home learning activities and other ways to involve parents with children’s classwork. Help school to provide information to parents on how to monitor homework, grade level expectations, and practice and enrichment activities.</p> <p>Direct service: Meet with groups or individual parents to share strategies to increase student success in school. Plan, coordinate, and monitor interventions implemented by parents and teachers.</p>
<p>Involvement in decision making governance, and advocacy</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Attending school functions Meaningful parent participation 	<p>Indirect service: Help school create participatory roles for parents and community members in PTA/PTO, advisory councils, Title I, committees.</p> <p>Direct service: Train parents representatives in decision-making skills, collaboration, and ways to communicate with other parents about school improvement activities. Facilitate development of basic policies on curriculum, homework, and assessment.</p>

*Based on Joyce Epstein’s parent involvement activities (Christenson et al, 1992).

Below are the components of a school and family partnership and the strategies to implement them according to Melnick and Fiene, 1990.

The family involvement program is jointly directed by parents and school staff.

- ◆ Establish a decision-making body that allows parents and staff to manage the family involvement program, develop strategies, organize activities and resolve problems.
- ◆ Plan the program based on input from families.
- ◆ Include parent involvement measures and indicators in school performance evaluation.

Create an environment that welcomes all family members and eliminates barriers to involvement.

- ◆ Actively recruit all caregivers to participate. These include: siblings, extended families, friends, non-custodial parents, guardians, and community members.
- ◆ Provide space for families to informally meet and interact (e.g., Family Resource Room).
- ◆ Train office staff to make parents welcome and answer their questions.
- ◆ Allow parents to visit the school and classrooms at any time.
- ◆ Provide child care, transportation, and interpreters for school-related activities.

- ◆ Create a welcoming climate.
- ◆ Hold some school events at other community locations that may be more comfortable for parents.
- ◆ Lobby with local employers to give parents time off to attend activities or to volunteer.

Establish multiple methods of communicating with families.

- ◆ Make staff available to do family outreach and home visits.
- ◆ Schedule parent/teacher conferences before school begins in the fall.
- ◆ Encourage teachers to contact parents as soon as concerns arise.
- ◆ Communicate positive student accomplishments and progress to parents.
- ◆ Establish an outreach network in which involved families reach out to other families.
- ◆ Create a buddy system where families partner with other families to bring them to events.
- ◆ Publish regular newsletters that are jointly written by parents, students, and staff.
- ◆ Write flyers and newsletters in all of the languages spoken by students and their parents.
- ◆ Organize a phone tree.
- ◆ Make announcements on the radio or public access TV.
- ◆ Use videotapes to communicate with parents.
- ◆ Establish a method for keeping non-custodial parents informed of school activities.

Provide a wide range of volunteer opportunities that build on a variety of skills and interests.

- ◆ Ask parents what they would like to do, what their interests, talents, and skills are.
- ◆ Match parents' interests with volunteer activities.
- ◆ Provide volunteer opportunities that can be done during non-school hours.
- ◆ Expand volunteer opportunities to include teaching classes, mentoring students and sharing cultural experiences.
- ◆ Acknowledge and celebrate family contributions.

Provide information for parents on their role in supporting their child’s education.

- ◆ Address parents’ concerns about issues that affect school performance; for example, bedtime routine, helping with homework, monitoring TV viewing, peer relations and conflict resolution.
- ◆ Involve families in home-learning activities.
- ◆ Develop a standard for homework instructions.

School staff is committed to family involvement in all aspects of the school.

- ◆ Train staff on ways to collaborate with families and to facilitate family involvement.
- ◆ Provide opportunities for staff to get to know families.
- ◆ Encourage staff to get out into the community.
- ◆ Employ parents and community members in the school.

Offer a wide range of appealing and educational programs for families.

- ◆ Provide classes and educational opportunities for parents based on their expressed interests.
- ◆ Sponsor activities for families to have fun together.
- ◆ Facilitate parents supporting one another.

Below are strategies to involve Hmong parents (Xiong, 1999).

Identify barriers and outreach

School administrators and staff should document opportunities, challenges and barriers that are faced by both parents and school personnel. For example, are families’ barriers related to family responsibilities and work schedules, language barriers, transportation or child care issues, methods of communications, or schedules of events?

Parents as partners

School staff should ask themselves the following questions:

- ◆ What can we learn from parents who have made significant impacts in our school?
- ◆ How can we collaborate and partner with parents who are already involved?
- ◆ What ways can we recognize involved parents to demonstrate our commitment to school-family partnership?

Words travel faster in the Hmong community. Hence, in order to involve Hmong families, schools need to identify the inside leaders (the active parents). These active parents should be encouraged to invite their friends and relatives to be involved. School may want to recognize parents' contributions and involvement by creating a parent involvement bulletin board that lists names of contributing parents and give certificates of appreciation.

ESL and Adult Education Program

Create and sustain adult education classes for Hmong parents. Studies showed that when parents feel that their English is improving, they become more involved in their children's education.

Involving other members in the family

Most programs in school focus on parents and students doing activities together or separately. There is lack of emphasis on older siblings teaching younger siblings or students and parents teaching one another (e.g., in the literacy programs).

Parent Center in school and/or in the community

Establish a parent center in school and/or in the community in order to make parents feel welcome and comfortable. In doing so, the school can offer resources and workshops for parents on a regular basis.

Find alternative ways to increase parent education and skills

Most parents lack the bicultural skills and resources to be effectively involved in their children's education. In Indianapolis, there is a collaboration between the school district and local businesses to provide parent education seminars during lunch hours at the parents' workplace.

In the Appendix I, there is a form from the training packet developed by Moles (1993). It provides additional ideas and suggestions for increasing learning opportunities in homes as well as greater continuity between home and school environments.

Listed below are strategies to overcome time constraints of teachers, and to overcome time and resource constraints of parents (U.S. Department of Education, 1997).

Strategies for helping teachers make time to develop school-family partnerships include:

- ◆ Assigning parent coordinators or home-school liaisons to help teachers maintain contact with parents through home visits or by covering classes for teachers so they can meet with parents
- ◆ Providing time during the school day for teachers to meet with parents or visit them at their homes
- ◆ Providing stipends or compensatory time off for teachers to meet with parents after school hours
- ◆ Freeing up teachers from routine duties, such as lunchroom supervision, in order to meet with students' family members.

To address parents' time constraints, the school can help by:

- ◆ Providing early notices of meetings and activities, allowing parents time to adjust their schedules
- ◆ Establishing homework hotlines or voice mail systems so parents can stay in touch with their children's schoolwork without leaving their homes
- ◆ Offering the same event more than once
- ◆ Providing information to parents who could not attend a meeting to keep them informed.

To address parents' resource constraints, the school can help by:

- ◆ Providing parents with transportation and child care services so that they can attend school events
- ◆ Holding school-initiated events near families' homes (e.g., at community or public housing centers)
- ◆ Conducting home visits.

APPENDIX I: Strategies for school personnel to help parents
develop home learning environments (Moles, 1993)

SCHOOL AND TEACHER STRATEGIES TO HELP PARENTS DEVELOP
SUCCESSFUL HOME LEARNING ENVIRONMENT

Directions:

Read the items under each characteristic. Then, list additional suggestions for ways teachers/school staff could help parents strengthen each characteristic.

Establishing a Daily Family Routine

- ◆ Regular homework policy – same amount of time each night.
- ◆ Be consistent in assigning homework – have a routine.
- ◆ Regular advance notice home of class/school activities.
- ◆ Friday Folder – send schoolwork home same day every week.
- ◆ _____
- ◆ _____

Monitoring Out-of-School Activities

- ◆ Enrichment activities before and after school – inform parents.
- ◆ Guidelines for constructive use of television – send home flyers or newsletter.
- ◆ _____
- ◆ _____

Modeling the Value of Learning and Hard Work

- ◆ Suggest or send home educational activities for whole family.
- ◆ Set up a school reference library families can use.
- ◆ _____
- ◆ _____

Expressing High but Realistic Expectations for Achievement

- ◆ Reward improved achievement.
- ◆ Recognition events for all children, not just those who are bright or well behaved.
- ◆ _____
- ◆ _____

Encouraging Child’s Overall Development and Progress in School

- ◆ Information on curriculum
- ◆ Opportunities to get to know principal and teachers
- ◆ Have a workshop on “Building Your Child’s Self-Esteem”
- ◆ “Happygrams” or positive post cards for achievement
- ◆ Provide weekly information reports on student work which parents sign and return with the child
- ◆ _____
- ◆ _____

Reading, Writing, and Discussion among Family Members

- ◆ Give a demonstration on “how to read with your child.”
- ◆ Send home examples of games that encourage children to listen carefully.
- ◆ Give parents packets of materials to take home and start home libraries.
- ◆ Have students interview their parents and/or grandparents about how life has changed since their childhood. Compile interviews into a “Family Memory Book”.
- ◆ Lend families books their kids like
- ◆ _____
- ◆ _____

Using Community Resources

- ◆ Hand out directory of community services and places to visit.
- ◆ Be alert to family needs in conversations and suggest contacting specific local agencies.
- ◆ Give parents suggestions for summer activities such as packets of learning materials.
- ◆ Suggest nearby individuals and organizations that can provide guidance and skills training to realize the potential of children.
- ◆ _____
- ◆ _____

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