



Why Is Family Involvement in Education Important?

by Karen Bogenschneider, Beth Gross, and Carol Johnson

In a best-selling book, Professor Laurence Steinberg¹ assembles an impressive body of evidence that youngsters' success in school affects how they do later in life. Even though education is one of the surest ways to lift families out of poverty,³ U.S. high school students are among the least academically competent in the industrialized world. Steinberg writes that poor school achievement is "genuine, substantial, and pervasive across ethnic, socioeconomic, and age groups" (p. 184).

To improve student achievement, the last 15 years of school reform have focused on course curriculum, instructional methods, and teacher training. Yet Steinberg claims that these reforms have accomplished very little, because academic achievement is shaped more by children's lives outside the school walls, particularly their parents, peers, and how they spend out-of-school time. If this country is going to turn around academic achievement, one of the most significant problems that must be addressed is the high prevalence of disengaged parents. Steinberg estimates that nearly one in three parents has no idea how their child is doing in school, and about one in six doesn't care whether their child earns good grades in school or not.¹

Harvard Professor Robert Putnam² agrees with this assessment of the importance of encouraging families' participation in their children's education. He has written that given a choice between a 10% increase in school budgets or a 10% increase in parent involvement, he would invest in parent involvement.

What Evidence Exists of the Value of Family Involvement in Education?

The evidence is clear. When parents are involved in their child's schooling, students get better grades, score higher on standardized tests, and drop out less often, as well as have better attendance records, higher aspirations, and more positive attitudes about school and homework. What's more, these positive impacts seem most important for children growing up in disadvantaged, highly-stressed families.^{4, 5, 9, 11}

We also know that the most important influence on whether parents are included or excluded from involvement in their child's education is teachers and administrators. What the teacher does has proven more important in how knowledgeable parents are about helping their child with school work than parents' education or marital status.¹⁷ Yet only 4% to 15% of teachers have had course work in parent involvement.

What Policies and Programs Help Families Educate Their Children?

Policymakers interested in promoting school success must look beyond the school door.

Family, school, and community partnerships are one way that policymakers can build family involvement. Nationally, the cost of these partnerships is about \$20 to \$30 per pupil for all school, district, and state expenses. Moreover, school districts with a line item in the budget for partnerships have higher-quality partnership programs.²⁵

High-quality child care translates into measurable improvement in language, math, and social skills through second grade. In fact, substituting a poor-quality caregiver with an excellent one improves a child's school readiness by 50%. Looking further down the road, kids in higher-quality preschools are more likely to earn better wages and complete high school and college.^{27, 28, 29, 30}

Summer school programs have helped reverse the decline in achievement that occurs among poor children during the summer months. Both advantaged and disadvantaged kids learn at the same rate during the school year. During the summer, however, the test scores of advantaged kids improve, while disadvantaged kids tread water. At the end of primary school, the widening of the achievement gap between low-income kids and their middle class peers can be completely explained by summer learning losses. In response, the Baltimore Summer Academy used college volunteers to teach summer school to kindergartners in urban, high-poverty settings. After the third year, students achieved a boost in reading test scores.³²

Out-of-school-time programs provide learning experiences for school children in supervised settings. In a recent study of 25 programs, student participation resulted in better school performance, more positive attitudes toward school, higher educational performance, and improved school attendance.³³

How Are Other States Promoting Family Involvement in Education?

State policymakers have attempted to promote family involvement in two basic ways:

(1) **Including reimbursement for parent involvement in the school aid formula.** In 1991, the Wisconsin Legislature

enhanced four-year-old kindergarten by increasing the enrollment fraction for determining revenue limits and general aids from .5 to .6 per student if the district chose to provide parent outreach activities. This funding covers activities such as home visits, parent meetings at school, family activity nights, kindergarten orientation, and family resource center visits.³⁶

(2) Passing legislation separate from the school aid formula.

State legislatures across the country have passed a number of laws to promote family involvement in education. A brief summary follows.^{17, 34, 35}

In **Arizona**, the legislature amended a bill in 1995 to require the Department of Education to create a program that trains parents as teachers.

California passed a bill in 1994 and expanded it in 1997, which specified that employers with 25 or more employees should allow up to 40 hours for employees to participate in their child's schooling. Parents, grandparents, or guardians are permitted to use vacation time, accrued personal or sick leave, compensatory time, or leave without pay to participate in school-related activities.

In **Hawaii**, Legislative Act 238 requires that the Department of Education create a "comprehensive system of educational accountability" that specifically addresses engaging parents as partners in the educational process. More than 2,700 parents participated in 108 meetings throughout the state to develop state standards for parents as partners in learning.

Louisiana, as of 1991, required schools to select parent advocates who help increase parent involvement, hear parents' complaints, and facilitate communication between schools and families.

Massachusetts passed a bill in 1996 to assess a number of parent outreach programs, with universal implementation required by the start of 1997.

Since 1990, **Minnesota** has permitted state workers who are parents to use up to 16 hours of vacation time, sick leave, or other arranged time to attend parent/teacher conferences or other school meetings.

New Jersey, in response to court decrees in the 1990s, increased spending to bring low-income students up to state standards. For poverty-affected districts, the state funds such activities as full-day kindergarten, whole-school programs, parental outreach activities, preschool for three- and four-year-olds, and summer school.

In **Ohio**, since the 1997-98 school year, school district report cards must include their progress in building school, family, and community partnerships.

In 1984 **South Carolina** mandated School Improvement Councils in every school. These councils, comprised of parents, teachers, and administrators, were charged with developing better home/school relations.

In **Tennessee**, the legislature passed a bill in 1989 requiring schools to hold parent/teacher conferences twice a year for each student.

Washington state requires specific course credits in parent involvement for teacher certification.

For the complete article and the references, go to http://www.familyimpactseminars.org/s_wifis20c02.pdf. ■