

Parents as Partners

**Building School
and Home
Connections**

for Every Child's Success

Family Involvement Program

Based on Respected Research & Literature

Building School and Home Connections

The *Building School and Home Connections* kits provide a blueprint for increasing parent involvement in both the individual classroom and school-wide settings. These kits provide meaningful ways for families to get involved in their children's education and the school community. Much research has been devoted to parent involvement and its effects on students' achievement and learning.

Parent Involvement

Parent and family involvement has many benefits. Research supports those beliefs and concludes that parent and family involvement leads to increased academic success and improved behavior and social functioning (Barnard 2003; Deslandes et al. 1999; El Nokali, Bachman, and Votruba-Drzal 2010; Marcon 1999; Miedel and Reynolds 1999). *Building School and Home Connections* provides the resources and materials necessary to encourage and implement parent involvement, including Family Lesson plans that can be used to invite parents into the classroom to learn with their children, suggestions for school-wide family events in the Management Book, and quick, easy-to-implement tips in the Parent Guide. This product essentially provides the road map for teachers and schools to use to encourage parent involvement.

Parent Involvement and Student Achievement

What is the connection between parent involvement and student achievement? While researchers have explored this question and have found positive implications for parent involvement for secondary students (Deslandes et al. 1999), special education students (Deslandes et al. 1999; Miedel and Reynolds 1999), low-income students (Miedel and Reynolds 1999), and students from different ethnic backgrounds (Fan 2001; Okagaki and Frensch 1998), the most research has been completed on early efforts for parent involvement.

Marcon (1999) collected data from preschool teachers regarding the type of contact they had with each parent. The results showed children of highly involved parents had significantly higher academic achievement and higher scores on the behavior development scale.

Miedel and Reynolds (1999) found that the frequency of parent involvement in preschool and kindergarten was positively associated with reading achievement and had an effect beyond the early childhood years. Their study shows that weekly involvement is associated with lower rates of grade-level retention and fewer years in special education for children up to age 14.

Barnard's (2003) findings indicated that the more years a teacher perceived the parent to be participating at a comparatively average or above number of hours or days, was associated with lower rates of high school dropout, higher rates of high school completion, and more years of completed schooling. One of the biggest contributions of this study was its examination of long-term effects. The data supports that parent involvement has a positive impact that lasts until age 20.

Additional research has also shown that parental involvement has a positive impact on the student's behavior and social functioning (El Nokali, Bachman, and Votruba-Drzal 2010) and has a predictive power in determining student achievement outcomes for both special and general education students (Deslandes et al. 1999).

Research backs up experience and clearly supports the vast benefits of parent involvement on student achievement and success. *Building School and Home Connections* provides multiple resources and opportunities to increase parent involvement and, ultimately, student achievement. Such resources include the following:

- ◆ Teacher's Guide with Family Lessons and Family Homework pages
- ◆ Management Book with Content-Area Family Nights
- ◆ Parent Guides with quick, easy ideas in parent-friendly language

The Role of Teachers

Teachers have a critical role in supporting parental involvement. When teachers give specific suggestions about ways in which parents can help with learning, parents' beliefs about their importance to student learning also increases (Hoover-Dempsey et al. 2005).

Building School and Home Connections was designed to provide the needed resources and materials to help teachers and school-wide coordinators develop equal partnerships at the school and class level. With the resources provided in the kit, any school staff member can feel comfortable taking on the rewarding job of establishing an effective program to build parents as partners.

Empowering Teachers

“It is our duty as educators to empower all parents to recognize the active role they already play in their own children’s education” (Suoto-Manning and Swick 2006, 190). However, in order to empower parents, teachers first need to be empowered. It is not uncommon for teachers to think, “This is something I definitely want to put into practice, but I’m not ready for it” or “I just don’t know how.” Fortunately, Rasinski and Fredericks (1989) have shaped a solid structure for guiding teachers that is built around the four dimensions of monitoring, informing, participation, and empowerment. The key for each dimension is for the educator to remember that it is a two-way street. The educator doesn’t simply communicate with the parent but actually opens the lines for communication to flow two ways. For each level in this hierarchy, both parents and educators have a role.

Monitoring

Teachers monitor students and their progress throughout the school day, making sure assignments are appropriate and are meeting students’ needs. Parents, on the other hand, monitor their children’s emotional responses to daily activities and their approach to homework. Both parties should communicate any key findings to the other before proceeding to the next level.

Informing

At this level, communication is flowing two ways. Teachers are contacting parents through newsletters, notes home, calls, emails, and conferences, and parents feel comfortable doing the same. Teachers can make specific suggestions for activities at home, while parents can provide teachers with background information and further information about the student’s home culture.

The front matter of the *Building School and Home Connections* Teacher’s Guide has multiple suggestions for keeping the open lines of communication to parents. Suggested communication tools within the kits include:

- ◆ Frequency List
- ◆ Communication Log or Communication Journal
- ◆ Blogs or websites
- ◆ Newsletters and classroom briefs
- ◆ Fliers announcing classroom and school-wide events

Participation

The participation level is most notably one that is typically one-sided. Parents can participate by helping in the school and volunteering in the classroom, but teachers are rarely participating in the lives of their students' families. This can be done, but not until trust has been developed between teacher and parent. Conducting home visits (when invited) is an excellent way to see the strengths of a family and to help participate in building these strengths, often through suggestions and training offered to parents.

Empowerment

Finally, at the empowerment level, "teachers look to parents as colleagues for advice and support" (Rasinski & Fredericks 1989, 181). Parents are asked for help with curricular and instructional decisions as well as decisions affecting the school community. In return, teachers are solicited by parents to help make similar high-stakes decisions in their lives.

The biggest challenges teachers and parents find when becoming partners in the learning process are time, communication, and having a mutual understanding of each other's role (St. George 2010). Parents were not certain as to how to help their children at home and were afraid to interfere with the teacher's role. And, teachers were not sure how to work with parents while maintaining authority. Additionally, time was found to be one of the greatest challenges because it was an underlying factor affecting all parent involvement. Time is needed to effectively communicate and receive communication, and then communication is needed to build relationships. Fortunately, if we know that, we can overcome them.

Plausible solutions determined by the parent and teacher study group from the St. George (2010) study includes offering more professional development for both parents and teachers individually and together, with potential for diversity training. This training could address how to work around time constraints, efficient ways to communicate, and relationship building in the case where teachers and parents are being trained together.

To improve communication, the parent and teacher study group also suggested sending invitations, using back-and-forth communication tools, frequent informative newsletters, handbooks, classroom Web pages, and making sure to eliminate too much text by using bullets, highlighting, and including important dates.

The final suggestion made by the group was for teachers to reconceptualize homework to involve parents and children as co-learners. Not only does this build on families' funds of knowledge but it also positions the parent as another caring adult from whom the child can learn. *Building School and Home Connections* provides 30 Family Homework pages in each

Teacher’s Guide. These pages are intended to inform parents about the content their children are learning and to involve parents in the learning. Each Family Homework activity provides a fun, easy way for parents and children to discuss and learn about the content. Family Homework activities cover the following topics and content areas:

- ◆ Daily Routines
- ◆ Language Arts
- ◆ Math
- ◆ Science
- ◆ Social Studies

Empowering Families

Tap into Parent Knowledge

Teachers must tap into families’ literacy and cultural knowledge by recognizing and utilizing the strengths of the families. Assessing a community’s “funds of knowledge” is important for creating a school that values its constituents and their backgrounds (Frey 2010). In order to recognize and utilize the strengths of their families, educators must develop a sense of “affection and appreciation for what the community can offer” (Frey 2010, 46). With a strength-based approach, there is a focus on respect and the mutual exchange of knowledge.

Gain Understanding

The next step is to obtain information from families to gain a better understanding of the families that the program will service. It is important for us to know the resources or “funds of knowledge” parents and families possess so that we can capitalize on those resources. Teachers should pursue information regarding participating families’ hopes, goals, and aspirations for their children as well as the families’ ideas about what they should, could, or might bring to further their child’s learning (Hoover-Dempsey and Whitaker 2010, 68). This can be done through surveys, interviews, questionnaires, and informal conversations with families.

Open Communication

Once the teacher has established that initial point of contact, it is important to continue ongoing communication. This can be done using varied methods of outreach and communication.

Suggestions to foster ongoing communication include:

- ◆ Create welcoming entries to the school.
- ◆ Greet parents as they enter the building.
- ◆ Utilize a “report book” in which both teacher and parent can comment about the child’s response to learning activities.
- ◆ Have an open-door policy in which parents are invited to observe the child’s learning in the class (Hoover-Dempsey and Whitaker 2010, 74).

Building School and Home Connections provides multiple suggestions for maintaining open communication with parents. From hosting a meet-and-greet to writing a letter of introduction to parents and students before the school year begins, this product has multiple ideas and resources to ensure open communication.

Workshops

Workshops support traditional instruction and methods as well as engage parents in what their children are learning at school.

Workshops also strengthen a positive sense of efficacy and help parents to feel more comfortable in how they define their role. To further empower parents and families, Ortiz and Ordonez-Jasis (2005) suggest offering workshops in which participants can discuss how literacy affects their lives and discuss learning literacy activities.

Building School and Home Connections includes agendas and talking points for schools to cover during Parent Education Workshops, making it easy for schools to involve parents in workshops. The Management Book provides agendas and talking points for the following Parent Education Workshops:

- ◆ Getting to Know the School
- ◆ Language Arts
- ◆ Math
- ◆ Science
- ◆ Social Studies

Embracing Parents as Partners

In all, the best way to approach developing parents as partners is to first explore your ideas and perceptions of family involvement to make certain that you are starting with a solid approach. Next, you will want to initiate an inclusive parent-involvement program by learning about these families. Developing two-way communication would be your next step, followed by invitations to parents to participate in the school community, which would, it is hoped, be reciprocated with similar invitations from them. Of course, you will need to provide a variety of opportunities for involvement as well as show your responsiveness to family life contexts. Ultimately, you will want to further develop parents as partners through trainings and workshops. Parent involvement can be described in many ways and motivated by many factors. While beneficial to parents, students, and teachers, it can not easily be reduced to a series of steps. However, the work of many key researchers has combined to provide a sequence to illuminate an effective way to tackle this overwhelming process for teachers. The first step is to understand that “family members are children’s first teachers” (Morrow, Mendelsohn, and Kuhn 2010, 83). After that happens, we are ready to embrace parents as partners.

Addendum

The following are the ways in which *Building School-Home Connections* aligns to Joyce Epstein’s research on the six types of parental involvement.

Type 1—Parenting: Assist families with parenting and child-rearing skills, understanding child and adolescent development, and setting home conditions that support children as students at each age and grade level. Assist schools in understanding families.

There are many supports for this in *Building School-Home Connections*. First, is the explicit information in the Parent Guides on setting home conditions to best support the child’s academic success and specific information on the child’s development. For example, the Parent Guides each include a spread on setting up work stations at home and establishing morning routines that are right for the child’s age and grade.

Type 2—Communicating: Communicate with families about school programs and student progress through effective school-to-home and home-to-school communications.

There are parent communicators included with every activity/event in *Building School-Home Connections*.

Type 3—Volunteering: Improve recruitment, training, work, and schedules to involve families as volunteers and audiences at the school or in other locations to support students and school programs.

In *Building School-Home Connections*, there are explicit directions as to how to solicit and utilize parent volunteers, including forms to keep things organized.

Type 4—Learning at Home: Involve families with their children in learning activities at home, including homework and other curriculum-linked activities and decisions.

There are explicit homework and other content-based activities, including reading suggestions and key grade-level skills, in every Parent Guide in *Building School-Home Connections*.

Type 5—Decision Making: Include families as participants in school decisions, governance, and advocacy through PTA/PTO, school councils, committees, and other parent organizations.

These particular types of activities are not explicitly addressed in *Building School-Home Connections*.

Type 6—Collaborating with the Community: Coordinate resources and services for families, students, and the school with businesses, agencies, and other groups, and provide services to the community.

There are explicit pages in *Building School-Home Connections* on soliciting and utilizing community support.

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