

Parent and Family Involvement

Parents are their children's first teachers. The involvement of all parents, including parents of LEP/ELLs, contributes to their children's learning and enables students to succeed not just in school but throughout life. Support for parental involvement is shown in compelling research evidence suggesting that parental involvement has positive effects on children's academic achievement (Carrasquillo and London, 1993; Delgado-Gaitan, 1991; Heine, 1992; Henderson, 1987; Quelmatz, Shields and Knapp, 1995).

Parents and Families as Active Partners

The input of parents and families in the educational process is, now more than ever, of paramount urgency. Children do best in school when their parents are able to play four key roles: that of teacher, supporter, advocate, and decision maker. Parental involvement is associated with numerous benefits:

- sustained gains in academic achievement
- enhanced English language skills
- increased cognitive growth
- improved behaviors in school
- better home-school relationships
- more favorable attitudes toward school
- higher self-concept

Current research (Bermudez and Marquez, 1996; Carrasquillo and London, 1993; Ochoa and Mardirosian, 1996; Sherman, Cheyette and Peterson, 1991; Shartrand, Weiss, Kreider and Lopez, 1997) has established a positive correlation between parents' active participation in their children's learning and schooling and the children's sustained gains in academic achievement.

The Role of Parents Within the NYSED Standards Movement

An integral part of the New York State Education Department's standards movement is the participation of all parents in the educational process. Toward this end, the Department requires parent participation in the building-level planning teams formed in accordance with Part 100.11 of the Regulations of the Commissioner of Education. By becoming active participants in their children's education and involved in the decision-making process at the school level, they become well informed about the important educational issues affecting their children. Thus, parents and schools work together to create a strong parent-school partnership.

Key Concepts:

- ◆ Parent involvement (CR Part 100.11)
- ◆ Benefits to student achievement
- ◆ Parent-school partnership
- ◆ Ongoing feedback
- ◆ School-based strategies to increase parental involvement
- ◆ Early literacy practices at home
- ◆ Community resources

The joy and all the economic and spiritual benefits of reading should be part of everyone's life, and the family is the place where it all begins.

Barbara Bush

Diverse Needs of Parents of Limited English Proficient/English Language Learners

Although some parents of LEP/ELLs may be familiar with the language and culture of the United States, a significant number of parents may not yet speak English, the language of the school. Some parents may exhibit cultural traits different from those of the teachers of their children. They may uphold values that appear to conflict with mainstream practices in the United States and with beliefs about education and family roles. Some of these different perspectives may present impediments to their children's success in American public schools.

Schools need to view ethnically and linguistically diverse parents as concerned individuals who are willing and able to contribute to the improvement of their children's progress. Schools must have high expectations for parental involvement. Ochoa and Mardirosian (1996) cite examples in which low parent participation is, in many ways, related to low expectations of students' academic success. Parents whose English is limited should be encouraged to participate in their children's education, and should be accommodated in terms of language.

School-Based Strategies to Increase Parental Involvement

Understanding the many influences in the lives of students both inside and outside the classroom can enrich efforts to develop a curriculum that is meaningful and relevant and will conform to State and local academic learning standards. The following strategies can assist educators as they help parents understand the academic and learning challenges ahead for their children and become more involved in their children's academic achievement:

- All school staff should try to learn about the characteristics of the parents and families of the students in their school. By identifying these characteristics (language, educational and literacy levels, socioeconomic background, family constellation, household composition), teachers can begin to plan appropriate activities to motivate parents to become more involved in their children's education. For example, if the parent of a student has two jobs in order to keep up with the financial demands of the family, parent meetings or conferences should be planned accordingly.
- Provide frequent communication, both written and oral, in the language(s) and on a level parents understand. Keep them informed about school events and academic standards. Direct and individual communication is more effective than just inviting parents to school, advising them to check homework, and asking that they be more attentive to the content being taught. Listen to the parents' concerns, issues, and experiences to be able to make informative decisions about parental involvement and services. In addition, provide home visits to assist parents and students in need and to keep them informed and involved.

- Provide parents with an opportunity to provide ongoing feedback. Include parents early on in considering issues ranging from policy decisions to schedules and content. Moreover, research indicates that curriculum developers should draw on parents' knowledge and experiences to integrate salient cultural interests and social issues into literacy content. The school might prepare an informal questionnaire, written in the parents' native language, asking for suggestions for activities and ideas that parents and teachers can do together to improve student performance and attitudes. Teachers can learn from parents about their child-rearing beliefs and family skills and resources.
- Focus on the strengths that parents and families bring to the community, such as their language and culture.
- Schools should send home specific tasks that parents can do with their children on a regular basis. Parents will develop a routine of expecting the communication and of completing the specific tasks assigned.
- Schools need to provide opportunities to strengthen parenting skills, enhance parent networks, and minimize parental stress. Often, teachers deal with students and families challenged by poverty, single parenthood, and many other social demands. Such stressful circumstances can impede effective parenting practices, which could affect their children's development and school achievement.
- For parents of limited English proficient/English language learners who are not themselves fully literate, it is especially critical to have meaningful opportunities to enhance their literacy skills. Schools may wish to implement family literacy programs in which the whole family is involved in reading by creating a take-home library with a variety of books and magazines in the parents' native language. They may provide such programs after school, in the evening, or on Saturdays to accommodate the families' needs. A "parents' room," containing a library of books, articles, and other sources of information about parenting and literacy development, could provide additional support.
- Schools can also encourage parents to participate by providing ESL classes for parents, GED classes in English or the native language if available, and workshops on writing skills. Schools can further encourage parental participation by stressing parent-child learning (i.e., reading/writing) activities, and by offering parents the opportunity to strengthen or develop literacy skills in the native language.
- Schools should emphasize to parents the need to provide learning activities in the family's dominant language, whenever possible (Crawford, 1997).

In conclusion, it is essential that schools look at ways to bring parents into the educational process through the creation of school partnerships with parents to assist and encourage their active participation in their children's education.

Ten Ways to Promote Language Learning at Home

Below is a brief list of strategies that can be useful in helping parents understand ways in which they can assist in their children's language and literacy development.

TEN WAYS PARENTS CAN PROMOTE LANGUAGE LEARNING AT HOME

1. Begin reading to your children at an early age, and as often as possible, in your native language and if possible in English. Literacy in the native language helps in developing proficiency in the second language.
2. Visit your public library with your children. Choose books for yourself and your children. As often as possible, read them stories in your native language and about your native culture.
3. Keep many types of reading materials (books, magazines, newspapers, etc.) in your native language and in English in your home. Encourage your older children to read to your younger children, and allow your children to see that you also enjoy reading.
4. Ask your children questions about what they have read, such as:
 - What is happening in the story?
 - What do you think will happen next?
 - What did you like best about the story?

Asking these questions can help your children become excited about reading, more responsible for their own learning, and more knowledgeable about their native and new cultures.

5. Take your children to places in the community that offer educational activities and learning experiences. Talk to your children about what they are seeing. Provide them with the names of new objects of attention, concern, or interest. Answer questions they may have. Remember, you are your child's first teacher.
6. Tell your children stories about your family, as well as stories and songs you liked to hear when you were a child in your native country. In this way, not only are you reinforcing listening skills, but you are also passing along important cultural information.
7. Discuss things that happen in school every day. Engage your children in conversation about their favorite subjects and teachers, and any special events that go on. Listen closely to what they say in response.
8. Find different opportunities for your children to write frequently in your native language and in English. Encourage them to write in a journal or diary, leave notes for family members, compile shopping lists, write down recipes, and write letters to family, friends, and/or pen pals.
9. Select television programs that you and your child can watch and discuss. Limit the amount of time your children can watch television and encourage them to read, write, listen to music, or talk with family members or friends.
10. Designate a quiet place in your home for reading where your child is comfortable and away from distractions.