

Parent Engagement and Student Success:

A Brief Review and Best Practices

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Data for DOING

Dr. Joy Smithson and her team of Data Scientists are dedicated to helping customers better understand their data to make timely decisions and take action to improve student success. Smithson has researched the relationship between parent and stakeholder engagement to both individual and aggregate student success. See her referenced work below.

INTRODUCTION

Start researching ways to improve outcomes at a school or district and you will quickly notice that parent engagement strategies are often suggested as a method of improving student success (Auerbach, 2007). Parent engagement is a long-studied, often misunderstood, and sometimes controversial topic (Olivos et al., 2011; Shuffelton, 2017). Broadly, parent engagement refers to the extent that students' guardians commit resources to and actively participate in their children's learning (Pomerantz et al., 2007; Zhang et al., 2011). Heather Weiss, founder and director of the Global Family Research Project, argues that "there is a skyscraper full of research showing how parent, family, and community engagement is crucial to children's learning and school success from birth on" (A New Era, 2010, p. 1).

The present review offers a strategic perspective on parent engagement, first discussing the traditional perspectives on parent involvement and its critique, then describing the spheres of influence on students' learning, and finally articulating the best practices to achieve desired outcomes.

Traditional Perspectives on Parent Engagement

Research on parent engagement began in earnest in the late 70s and was flourishing by the 80s and 90s. The scholarship consistently showed strong, if indirect, links to student achievement by way of parents' attitudes and participation in their youngster's education (Auerbach, 2007). With ever increasing attention to accountability and achievement gains, policymakers and accrediting institutions took note of the relationship between engagement and outcomes and began mandating efforts to involve parents in children's education (Shuffelton, 2017; Stitt & Brooks, 2014). These mandates outlined the activities for which schools and districts could receive government funding, established clearly defined roles for educators and parents, and articulated a narrow view of appropriate parental involvement.

Traditional engagement models often focus on ways parents can support the school's agenda by volunteering on committees, raising funds, or attending meetings (Auerbach, 2007; Latunde, 2017; McKenna & Millen, 2013; Osefo, 2017). Engagement efforts focused primarily on the school's agenda makes many families feel dismissed, unwelcome, and marginalized (Auerbach, 2007; Miller et al., 2016). These types of engagement "are reflective of parents who have higher levels of social capital and are from the middle class" (Osefo, 2017, p. 65). In other words, affluent families are more likely to have access to the resources and network that would facilitate school-based involvement and, consequently, feel comfortable in these situations (Auerbach, 2007; Osefo, 2017).

Schools that emphasize a traditional approach to parent involvement strategies tend to share a common theme, particularly in urban environments: "teachers in low-income communities are more likely to be white and to come from a higher social class than the students and families they serve" (Miller et al., 2016, p. 41). Mismatches in parents' and teachers' social and cultural backgrounds, and the extent to which they (dis)agree on what an ideal relationship looks like, can have an incredible impact on students (Miller et al., 2016). In these situations, parents tend to feel negative after interacting with school personnel, and describe these exchanges as "wrought with misunderstanding and unspoken hostility" (Reynolds, 2010, p. 152). Sometimes these misunderstandings are perceived as microaggressions and evidence of a system of oppression that they must warn their children to both fight against and of which to be wary (Reynolds, 2010).

In their study of student-teacher and parent-teacher relationships among struggling readers in first grade, Hughes and Kwok (2007) found that African American students and their parents had less supportive relationships with teachers compared to Hispanic and White students and their parents. African American students were considered more aggressive by their peers as well. In a separate study, teachers' ratings of parents' involvement and their own feelings of alliance with parents was lowest for African American parents, controlling for differences in socio-economic status (Wong & Hughes, 2006). Another study found

“that school staff often perceive Latino families negatively, viewing Latino children as causing schools’ low performance and Latino parents as having low academic expectations” (Miller et al., 2016, p. 41). These perceptions have real and lasting consequences: Disparities in achievement gains, retention, and participation in advanced placement courses have been consistently documented in the literature (Reynolds, 2010) and remain an issue for the US public education system (Musu-Gillette et al., 2017).

Miller and colleagues (2016) note that such trends are particularly noticeable when ethnic differences between teachers and pupils exist. Grant and Potter (2011) argue that these are examples of how the narrow, traditional approach to parent-engagement “was structured according to an assimilationist majority-minority model in which minority students and their homes and culture were seen as deficit and needing to fit into the White mainstream” (p. 121). Deficit assumptions or philosophies are reflected in the idea that administrators and teachers are the sole experts with knowledge to impart and that parents must be taught how to care for their children and get involved in their education (McKenna & Millen, 2013; Poza et al., 2014).

Especially egregious is the assumption that parents are indifferent to their children’s education if they are not interacting directly with school personnel (Latunde & Clark-Louque, 2016; Poza et al., 2014; Reynolds, 2010). There are numerous reasons why parents may not visit campus, participate in bake sales, or otherwise get involved with the school in prescribed ways: Parents may work multiple jobs or earn wages by the hour rather than salary, complicating requests for time away from work; they may believe their limited time is better invested by talking with their child rather than attending school-focused functions. Whatever the reasons parents have for their lack of involvement with the school, indifference is an unlikely factor. Auerbach (2007) explains: “virtually all parents care about their children’s education but parents of color and poor parents often show their support behind the scenes in ways that go unrecognized by schools” (p. 700).

Telling parents the educational priorities that affect their own children denies parents’ agency and fuels a sense of exclusion despite schools’ efforts for involvement (Ferlazzo, 2011). For these reasons, and those just discussed, traditional models have lost favor for more inclusive and culturally sensitive approaches; these efforts being more commonly referenced as ‘parent engagement’ as opposed to ‘parent involvement’ (Abel, 2018; Hennessey, 2018; Miller et al., 2016; Reynolds, 2010; Stefanski, Valli, & Jacobson, 2016). Ferlazzo (2011) distinguishes involvement from engagement, arguing that “the goal of family engagement is not to serve clients but to gain partners,” which necessitates “listening to what parents think, dream, and worry about” (p. 12). Significant and lasting achievement gains begin to be observed when parents and educators have truly collaborative relationships (Ferlazzo, 2011). Consequently, relationships are truly at the heart of successful parent engagement efforts.

Interpersonal Relationships & Achievement

Students' interpersonal relationships play a critical role in their success. In part, this is because one's attitudes, beliefs, perceptions, and, ultimately, her identity is shaped through interactions with others (Baxter & Braithwaite, 2008; Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Li, 2017). Students' approach to schoolwork, their desire to attend class, and their overall academic success is heavily influenced by their interactions with parents, peers, school faculty, and administration. In fact, the quality and consistency of these interpersonal interactions create and continuously reshape what we commonly refer to as school environment or school climate (Bradshaw et al., 2014; Haynes et al., 1997). That is to say, a school's climate is represented in the quality of the relationships on campus, and the degree to which those relationships are caring and emotionally supportive (Berkowitz et al., 2017).

A school's climate reflects the extent to which those who learn and work there feel respected, supported, connected, and safe. This climate can range from warm, inviting, and collaborative to broken, hostile, and unorganized. Decades of empirical research demonstrates a positive relationship between school climate and students' self-concept and self-esteem, academic motivation, prosocial behavior and academic achievement (Haynes et al., 1997; McEvoy & Welker, 2000). Schools with healthy environments experience fewer incidents of bullying, suspensions, and drug use (Bradshaw et al., 2014). We know a healthy school climate can reduce the negative influence of low socioeconomic status on students' performance (Berkowitz et al., 2017). By the same token, a negative climate can exacerbate problems (Anderson et al., 2004; McEvoy & Welker, 2000). For instance, students report more violence (e.g., being pushed/slapped) when school rules are unclear or inconsistent (Reid et al., 2006).

Parents' level of engagement is one indicator of a school's climate (Seeley, 2011). Among other variables, the extent to which parents feel welcome, involved, and knowledgeable about their child's experiences (both good and bad) at school is an indicator of school climate (Bradshaw et al., 2014). With few exceptions (Hill & Tyson, 2009; Viljaranta et al., 2018), parents' participation in their children's education has demonstrated positive effects (Pomerantz et al., 2007; Zhang et al., 2011); consequently, engaging parents has become "an integral part of education reform efforts" and policies (Mapp & Kuttner, 2013, p. 5). In their May (2018) newsletter, the Johns Hopkins School of Education equated the importance of family and community engagement to academic-focused programs. In the article, Professor Joyce Epstein says, "what we've learned over the years from our research and from other research around the country is that family and community engagement is an equal and essential component of a good school organization" (Hennessey, 2018). Epstein (1995) articulates the value of parent engagement this way:

"With frequent interactions between schools, families, and communities, more students are more likely to receive common messages from various people about the importance of school, working hard, of thinking creatively, of helping one another, and of staying in school" (p. 2)

As an example of the impact seen in the research, Epstein says she and her colleague Steve Sheldon found that attendance improved by 2-3% when schools strategically implemented engagement programs and focused their efforts on reducing chronic absenteeism (Hennessey, 2018). Epstein and Sheldon (2002) report that students' attendance increased when

- (1) parents were given clear information about attendance policies and the impact of absences on students' learning and grades,
- (2) parents were provided a name and number to contact to ask questions or report issues, and
- (3) awards were given for positive behavior (e.g., attending school) rather than punishments issued as a result of undesirable behavior.

These are the engagement strategies that worked to reduce chronic absenteeism at this particular school. Success for your school might mean that chronic absenteeism is reduced. Or, success at your school might mean improved confidence and more diversity among students participating in rigorous academic programs. As Epstein (1995) states, "good programs will look different in each site, as individual schools tailor their practices to meet the needs and interests, time and talents, ages and grade levels of students and their families" (p. 705). Your parent engagement efforts should be tailored toward your short and long-term goals. Narrow your focus to one or two specific outcomes you hope to achieve through parent engagement, rather than trying to address all problems at once. Limiting the focus to one or two desired outcomes is best; such a level of focus allows you to be strategic in your efforts and redirect the course of action when engagement techniques fail.

Successful programs recognize the overlapping spheres of influence on student success and create multiple opportunities for communities, families, and schools to collaborate and track progress (Epstein, 1995). In an effort to facilitate successful programs, Epstein (1995) suggested a framework of six types of engagement or "six types of caring" to practice school-family partnerships: (1) parenting, (2) communicating, (3) volunteering, (4) learning at home, (5) decision making, and (6) collaborating with the community. Students are the primary focus of partnerships, but both parents and teachers uniquely benefit from ongoing engagement. Parents have reported increased confidence about parenting and teachers have reported a better understanding of families, while both have reported improved parent-teacher communication (Epstein, 1995; Epstein & Sheldon, 2002). Such success is only witnessed when parents feel welcome.

Abel encourages educators and the next generation of leaders to think creatively when engaging parents, and to ensure all parents feel welcome (Hennessey, 2018). Offering an example of a creative approach to engage parents, she describes a Baltimore city elementary school that hosted a workshop for fathers where they learned how to braid their daughters' hair. Abel explains that African American fathers are more likely to

engage in home based activities with their children, like reading, as opposed to visiting schools because they report feeling unwelcome. Understanding that these parents were likely engaged behind the scenes, this school sought an activity that would hopefully interest fathers and help them feel welcome on campus. Abel argues,

“While you might not think [hair braiding] has anything to do with academics, you have an opportunity to talk and chat with a father in a school and he has an opportunity later to bond with his child in a different way. All of those things go into subtle aspects of parent engagement that can pay off later in a more structured setting with academic grades and test scores” (Hennessey, 2018).

Abel’s example reflects what Epstein refers to as family-like schools, those schools that welcome all families and seek ways to engage them in meaningful ways. Schools that are family-like have demonstrated that parents, in turn, will create more school-like families that “reinforce the importance of school, homework, and activities that build student skills and feelings of success” (Epstein, 1995, 702). In such partnerships, “when schools work together with families to support learning children tend to succeed not just in school, but throughout life” (Olivos et al., 2011, p. 11). The next section offers best practices for engaging parents for authentic and meaningful partnerships to positively impact student success.

Best Practices for Parent Engagement

Remember that You and Parents Share a Common Goal

Collaboration is key. Although you have goals for your district, school, and classroom, work with parents to identify and establish goals that you’ll mutually work on with their child. An underlying theory of successful school-community partnerships is that schools should not operate separately from families and communities but instead they should function as collaborative partnerships (Stefanski, Valli, & Jacobson, 2016). Achievement gains are more likely to be realized under collaborative efforts, too. Hoover-Dempsey and colleagues (2005) stated, “when parents know, as a function of their own experiences and their interactions with the school, that their involvement is expected and valued, they are more motivated to assume an active role in helping their children succeed in school” (p. 119). Novy (2018) recommends asking parents’ input when suggesting goals for their child’s progress as a way to facilitate a partnership, and identifying three specific goals to work toward together. Enhance parents’ capacity for engagement by offering specific suggestions about what parents can do to help their child reach these goals (Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2005).

Provide a Contact Person for Parents

Partnerships require two-way communication, so ensure that parents have a way to reach you. In their study of chronic absenteeism, Epstein and Sheldon (2002) found that attendance improved when parents were given a school contact person. They speculate that this effect was observed because having the number of

a responsive person to contact at the school made families feel that someone cared about them and their child. Providing contact information to parents signals that you want their input and that you are willing to listen, which helps build trust.

Respect & Facilitate Multiple Forms of Engagement

Expand your viewpoints on parent engagement, and remember that parents may engage in academic activities with their child in settings where they feel relaxed and comfortable— and they may not feel relaxed and comfortable at school. In their study of a text message intervention to reduce summer learning loss, Kraft and Monti-Nussbaum (2017) found that efforts to promote parents' engagement in their child's learning process increased parents' engagement in parent-teacher conferences and in a text messaging campaign, but no effects were observed for participating in a summer social event. The authors concluded that promoting one type of engagement (e.g., parent-teacher, school-based) may translate to other types of engagement, but not necessarily all types. Seek ways to facilitate different types of engagement, not just those that are school based. Activities that help parents connect with their child or where they can see a direct benefit for their child will likely yield more participation than activities that benefit the school more generally.

Send Specific & Detailed Invitations for Engagement

Across multiple studies, parents have been more responsive to engagement efforts when they receive direct and specific invitations for participation (Anderson & Minke, 2007; Kraft & Monti-Nussbaum, 2017; Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2005). Mass messages and general invitations notifying parents of engagement opportunities do not carry the same weight as direct, personalized, and specific invitations (Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2005). Rather than just letting parents know that something is happening, invite them directly. Invitations help build trust between parents and teachers, and direct invitations "offer an effective starting point for the creation of a partnership" (Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2005, p. 111). Children's invitation to parents is a powerful and consistent predictor of whether parents engage in home-based academic activities. Anderson and Minke (2007) stress the importance of specific invitations: "whether it comes from the child or the teacher and school, feeling welcomed and invited appears to be a critical variable for parents" (p. 320).

Report the Good Stuff

The good always outweighs the bad in the healthiest of relationships; this notion is true in parent-teacher, parent-principal, and parent-coach relationships. Most parents understand that their child is imperfect, but remember to share the good and happy things that happen in their child's day. Ferrara's (2015) study of an outreach program for students at-risk of dropping out of high school was considered most successful by intervention specialists when parents were told about their child's success at school, like passing a test or

completing a project. Sharing in the joy of students' success with parents creates that family-like school climate that parents so desire for their children.

Empower Parents to Navigate the School World

Ensure that parents have the tools they need to effectively help their child succeed. Evidence suggests that parents are more likely to engage when they feel empowered and equipped to support their child's success (Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2015). Importantly, increasing parents' self-efficacy will positively impact student learning. Studies indicate that parents' perceptions of efficacy is also related to their confidence in their child's ability to succeed, which has demonstrated a positive effect on students' success (Froiland et al., 2012; Hoover-Dempsey, 2015). Do not assume that parents know how to access information about their child, or that they know about all available resources for support. The education system is mired in a lot of jargon that is confusing to most people who are not professionally working in this field, making information difficult to obtain and interpret (Abamu, 2018; Ferrara, 2015). In situations where students are approaching or have reached academic risk, ensure that you take time to support parents' data literacy and data access, which will require more frequent and detailed conversations (Ferrara, 2015).

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