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## Engaging and Re-engaging Families When a Student is Not Doing Well\*

Most efforts to involve parents with their child's school seem aimed at those who want and are able to come to the school. It's important to have activities for such parents. It's also important to remember that, at most schools, these parents represent a small percent of families.

How can schools address the rest? Especially those whose children are doing poorly at school. Ironically, efforts to involve families whose youngsters are doing poorly often result in parents becoming less involved. For example, a parent of such a youngster typically is called to school to explore the child's problems and leaves with a sense of frustration, anger, and guilt. It is not surprising, then, that the parent subsequently avoids school contact as much as feasible. If schools really want to involve such families, they must minimize "finger wagging" and move to offer something more than parent education classes.

### Start by Understanding Barriers to Home Involvement

Analyses of the problem of enhancing home involvement underscore a host of barriers. Our analysis leads us to group three types: institutional, personal, and impersonal and three forms: negative attitudes, lack of mechanisms/skills, and practical deterrents – including lack of resources.

A few words will help clarify the categories. Institutional barriers stem from deficiencies related to resource availability (money, space, time) and administrative use of what is available. Deficient use of resources includes failure to establish and maintain formal home involvement mechanisms and related skills. It also encompasses general lack of interest or hostile attitudes toward home involvement among school staff, the administration, or the community. Instances of deficient use of resources occur when there is no policy commitment to facilitating home involvement, when inadequate provisions are made for interacting with family members who don't speak English, or when no resources are devoted to upgrading the skills of staff with respect to home involvement.

Similar barriers occur on a more personal level. Specific school personnel or family members may lack requisite skills or find participation uncomfortable because it demands time and other resources. Others may lack interest or feel hostile toward home involvement. For instance, any given teacher or family member may feel it is too much of an added burden to meet to discuss student problems. Others may feel threatened because they think they can't make the necessary interpersonal connections due to racial, cultural, and/or language differences. Still others do not perceive available activities as worth their time and effort.

Impersonal barriers to home and staff participation are commonplace and rather obvious. For example, there can be practical problems related to work schedules, transportation, and childcare. There can also be skill deficiencies related to cultural differences and levels of literacy. There may be lack of interest due to insufficient information about the importance of home involvement.

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\*For a fuller discussion, see: *Enhancing Home Involvement to Address Barriers to Learning: A Collaborative Process* online at <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/homeinv.pdf>

## About Addressing the Barriers

Overcoming barriers, of course, is a primary intervention concern. As indicated in the following Exhibit, the first emphasis should be on reducing institutional and impersonal barriers as much as is feasible.

### Exhibit

#### Examples of a Focus on Addressing Barriers to Home Involvement in Schooling

- **Improving mechanisms for communication and connecting school and home** (e.g., facilitating opportunities at school for family networking and mutual support, learning, recreation, enrichment, and for family members to receive special assistance and to volunteer to help; facilitating child care and transportation to reduce barriers to coming to school; language translation; phone calls and/or e-mail from teacher and other staff with good news; frequent and balanced conferences – student-led when feasible; outreach to attract and facilitate participation of hard-to-reach families – including student dropouts)
- **Addressing specific support and learning needs of families** (e.g., support services for those in the home to assist in addressing basic survival needs and obligations to the children; adult education classes to enhance literacy, job skills, English-as-a-second language, citizenship preparation)
- **Involving homes in student decision making** (e.g., families prepared for involvement in program planning and problem-solving)
- **Enhancing home support for learning and development** (e.g., family literacy; family homework projects; family field trips)
- **Recruiting families to strengthen school and community** (e.g., volunteers to welcome and support new families and help in various capacities; families prepared for involvement in school governance)
- **Capacity building of all stakeholders related to enhancing home involvement**

Note: Our Center provides a range of resources for home involvement in general and for outreach to families of struggling students in particular. A place to start is with the survey on home involvement; see

<http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/toolsforpractice/homeinvolvementsurvey.pdf> .

## About Engagement and Re-engagement

Understanding the concept of engagement is key to understanding ways to overcome reluctance. Engagement has three facets: behavioral, emotional, and cognitive (Fredricks, Blumenfeld, & Paris, 2004).<sup>\*</sup> Enhancing engagement requires moving from practices that overrely on the use of reinforcers to strategies that incorporate intrinsic motivation theory and research (Deci, 2009).<sup>\*\*</sup> From this perspective, it becomes evident how essential it is to avoid processes that (a) mainly emphasize “remedying” problems, (b) limit options, and (c) make family members feel controlled and coerced.

Research indicates that engagement is associated with positive outcomes and is higher when conditions are supportive, authentic, ensure opportunities for choice and provide sufficient structure. Conversely, disengagement is associated with threats to feelings of competence, self-determination, and/or relatedness to valued others. Maintaining engagement and re-engaging disconnected individuals requires minimizing conditions that negatively affect intrinsic motivation and maximizing conditions that have a positive motivational effect. Practices for preventing disengagement and efforts to re-engage disconnected families require minimizing conditions that negatively affect intrinsic motivation and maximizing those that enhance it.

Re-engagement provides a major challenge. The challenge is greatest when negative experiences in dealing with the school have resulted in a strong desire to avoid contact.

Obviously, it is no easy task to reverse well-assimilated negative attitudes and behaviors. As with disconnected students, personalized intervention strategies are required. Our work suggests the importance of outreaching to

- *ask individuals to share their perceptions of the reasons for their disengagement;* (This provides an invaluable basis for formulating a personalized plan to alter their negative perceptions and to prevent others from developing such perceptions.)
- *reframe the reasons for and the processes related to home involvement to establish a good fit with the family’s needs and interests;* (The intent is to shift perceptions so that the process is viewed as supportive, not controlling, and the outcomes are perceived as personally valuable and obtainable.)
- *renegotiate involvement;* (The intent is to arrive at a mutual agreement with a delineated process for reevaluating and modifying the agreement as necessary.)
- *reestablish and maintain an appropriate working relationship.* (This requires the type of ongoing interactions that over a period of time enhance mutual understanding, provide mutual support, open-up communication, and engender mutual trust and respect.)

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<sup>\*</sup>Fredricks, J., Blumenfeld, P., & Paris, A. (2004). School engagement: Potential of the concept, state of the evidence. *Review of Educational Research*, 74, 59-109.

<sup>\*\*</sup>Deci, E.L. (2009). Large-scale school reform as viewed from the self-determination theory perspective. *Theory and Research in Education*, 7, 244-252.

## Concluding Comments

Policy may call for and mandate “parent” involvement, but that has been no guarantee of effective practice. The problem is especially acute in middle and secondary schools, schools serving low income homes, and with respect to families who feel blamed when their child is not doing well at school.

As we stress in other Center resources, enhancing home involvement requires greater attention to the full range of caretakers. Think about students who are being raised primarily by grandparents, aunts, older siblings, foster home caretakers, and “nannies.” Thus, for schools to significantly enhance home involvement will require (1) broadening the focus beyond thinking only in terms of parents and (2) enhancing the range of ways in which schools connect with primary caretakers. Particular attention must be given to outreaching to those who are reluctant to engage with the school, especially if they have a child who is not doing well.

Also, to avoid marginalization and minimize fragmentation, it is essential to embed home involvement interventions into an overall approach for addressing factors interfering with school learning and performance and fully integrate the work into school improvement policy and practice.

*Your mom said that she never saw this report  
I sent her about your work.  
What do you know about that?*



*Gee, I guess the dog has been eating  
more than my homework.*



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