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Welcoming: Facilitating a New Start at a New School

*Students and families who relocate often have problems
adjusting to new schools. Their involvement with a new
school often depends on the degree to which the school reaches
out to them. This article reports on the approach to
intervention developed by the Early Assistance for Students
and Families Project for use by schools to facilitate the initial
school adjustment of newly entering students and their
families. Specifically discussed are the concept of welcoming;
intervention phases, tasks, and mechanisms; and the special
focus on enhancing home involvement.*

Key words: *adjustment; facilitators; parent–school
relationship; student aid program*

Children who change schools, espe-
cially those who change schools fre-
quently, are at risk for a variety of
emotional, behavioral, and learning
problems. For example, children who
move frequently have higher rates of
behavior problems and grade reten-
tion (Ingersoll, Scammon, & Ecker-
ling, 1989; Wood, Halfon, Scarlata,
Newacheck, & Nessim, 1993). Esti-
mates suggest that 20 percent to 25
percent of students change schools each
year. The figures are higher in poverty
area schools. Many make the transition
easily. For some, however, entry into a
new school is difficult. Those entering
late in a school year often find it espe-
cially hard to connect and adjust (Adel-
man & Taylor, 1991; Lash & Kirk-
patrick, 1990; Stokols & Shumaker,
1982). School change means leaving

old friends and having to fit into new
social and school structures—often
with different standards and expecta-
tions. When changes in residence are
frequent, youths may feel a sense of
powerlessness. Sensing little control
over their fate, some give up or lash
out.

For many of the same reasons, par-
ents, too, may find the transition diffi-
cult. As they grapple with the prob-
lems associated with family relocation,
their involvement with a new school
often depends on the degree to which
the school reaches out to them. A
school's staff, parents, and students can
use the crisis-like experience that of-
ten is associated with relocation as an
opportunity to promote growth and
enhance involvement in schooling for
students and their families.

This article reports on the approach
to intervention developed for use by
schools to facilitate the initial school
adjustment of newly entering students
and their families, especially those who
enter after a school session is under way
(Early Assistance for Students and
Families Project, 1993b). Also discussed
are the type of structural mechanisms
required to establish and maintain the
desired intervention activity (Early As-
sistance for Students and Families
Project, 1993a). The intervention has
evolved from a collaboration between a
school district and a university and re-
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workers, psychologists, teachers, and community representatives. General discussions of the conceptual under-pinnings for the work are found in the intervention literature on transactional and ecological perspectives, a psychological sense of community, and school-based services (for example, see Adelman & Taylor, 1993, in press; General Accounting Office, 1993; Germain, 1982; Pennekamp, 1992; Sarason, 1974). For specific approaches used to facilitate school transitions, the project benefited from experiences reported in earlier studies (see Cardenas, Taylor, & Adelman, 1993; de Anda, 1984; General Accounting Office, 1994; Hammons & Olson, 1988; Lash & Kirkpatrick, 1990; Lieberman, 1990; Newman, 1988).

Welcoming: Establishing a Psychological Sense of Community

The work reported in this article is being carried out as part of the Early Assistance for Students and Families Project, a demonstration project funded by the U.S. Department of Education. Initially, the project provided a special intervention program at 24 schools for students not making a successful adjustment to school (Adelman & Taylor, 1991). Project staff take as a given that "welcoming" is a first step toward helping new students and their families make a successful transition into a new school.

Welcoming should not be viewed simply as a set of activities for those at a school to carry out. The danger in approaching the topic in this way is that only those who are designated as welcomers may engage in the activity, and even they may only go through the motions. Consequently, there may be little commitment to helping new students and their families make a successful transition into the school, and the efforts that are made may not be seen in their broader context.

The project approaches the topic of welcoming new students and their families within the broad context of creating and maintaining a psychological sense of community at a school (McMillan & Chavis, 1986; Sarason, 1974). Essential to such a sense of community is the commitment of staff, students, and families to interact positively with each other and to provide social support, to reach out to new students and their families, and then to involve them in the life of the school. Extrapolating from the relevant literature, such a commitment is achieved best when mechanisms are put in place to ensure sufficient social support, ready access to information, instruction on how to function effectively in the school's culture, and appropriate ways to become involved in decision making.

Intervention

The authors conceptualize the intervention approach in terms of major phases and basic tasks. It is important to emphasize that the first major concern in efforts to enhance welcoming and home involvement is overcoming barriers that make it hard for students and families to function in the new community and school.

Research on barriers has suggested a variety of factors (for example, familial mores, cultural differences, job, social class, communication skills, attitudes of school personnel) that interfere with successful transitions to new settings and make involvement at school difficult. Barriers can be categorized as institutional, personal, or impersonal, with each type encompassing negative attitudes, lack of mechanisms and skills, or practical deterrents. Considerable attention is paid to barriers such as a student's shyness or lack of social skills and parent work schedules or lack of child care. We have found that less systematic attention is paid to institutional barriers. These barriers include inadequate resources (money, space, time) and lack of interest or hostile attitudes on the part of

staff, administration, and community toward interpersonal and home involvements; they also include the failure to establish and maintain formal mechanisms and related skills for involving homes. For example, there may be no policy commitment to facilitating a sense of community through enhanced strategies for welcoming students and families, and there may be no formal mechanisms for planning and implementing appropriate activity or for upgrading the skills of staff, students, and parents to carry out desired activities.

Phases

Strategies to enhance welcoming to a school and to increase home involvement in schooling evolve in three overlapping phases. The first phase involves a broad focus. It emphasizes use of general procedures to welcome and facilitate adjustment and participation of all who are ready, willing, and able to participate. The focus then moves to those who need just a bit more personalized assistance. Such assistance may include personal invitations, ongoing support for interaction with others and involvement in activities, aid in overcoming minor barriers to successful adjustment, a few more options to enable effective functioning and make participation more attractive, and so forth. Finally, to the degree feasible, the focus narrows to those who have not made an effective adjustment or who remain uninvolved because of major barriers, an intense lack of interest, or negative attitudes. This phase continues to use personalized contacts but adds cost-intensive special procedures.

Tasks

In pursuing each intervention phase, there are four major intervention tasks: (1) establishing a mechanism for planning, implementing, and evolving programmatic activity; (2) creating strategies for welcoming and initially involving new students and their families (for example, information and outreach to new students and families, a schoolwide welcoming atmosphere, a series of specific new student and new parent orientation processes); (3) providing social supports and facilitating involvement (for example, peer buddies or personal invitations to join relevant ongoing activities); and (4) maintaining support and involvement, including provision of special help for an extended period of time if necessary.

Establishing a Program Mechanism. Planning, implementing, and evolving programs to enhance activities for welcoming and involving new students and families requires institutional organization and involvement in the form of operational mechanisms such as a steering committee. For a program to be effective at a school, it must be a school program and not an add-on or special project, and there must be a group designated and committed to its long-term survival. In the case of efforts to enhance the welcoming and involvement of new students and families, a useful mechanism is a Welcoming Steering Committee. Such a committee is designed to adapt new strategies to fit in with what a school is already doing and to provide leadership for evolving and maintaining a welcoming program over the years.

The initial group usually consists of a school administrator (for example, principal or assistant principal), a support service staff member (for example, a dropout counselor, Chapter I coordinator, or school psychologist), one or two interested teachers, the staff member who coordinates volunteers, an office staff representative, and possibly one or two parents. A change agent (for example, an organization facilitator) is useful in helping initiate the group and can serve as an ex officio member. Eventually, such a group can evolve to deal with all school-related transitions.

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The first tasks involve clarification of the specific role and functions of the group and identification of possible additional members, activities already in place at the school for welcoming students and their families, activities carried out at other schools (for example, extended welcoming activities, support for at-risk students, use of volunteers, parent involvement), and minimal structures necessary to ensure there is a focus on welcoming new students and families (for example, a planning group, budget for welcoming activities, evaluation procedures regarding enhancing welcoming). Based on the information gathered, a needs assessment walk-through of the school can be carried out with a view to what new students and families see and experience. The specific focus is on such matters as front office welcoming messages and support procedures: Are appropriate welcoming materials used? Is there a need for other languages to communicate with families? Are there tour procedures for new parents and students? Are there appropriate welcoming and social support procedures for a student in a classroom (for example, peer greeters and peer buddies and special welcoming materials for newcomers)? Are there appropriate procedures for introducing parents to their child's teachers and others? After completing the needs assessment, the committee can plan for introducing new strategies.

Introducing major new programs into a school usually involves significant institutional change. In such cases, a change agent may be a necessary resource. The Early Assistance for Students and Families Project has found that such an organization facilitator can help establish the mechanisms needed at the site, demonstrate program components and facets, and provide on-the-job inservice education for staff who are to adapt, implement, and maintain the mechanisms and program.

Creating Welcoming and Initial Home Involvement Strategies. It is not uncommon for students and parents to feel unwelcome at a new school. The problem can begin with their first contacts. Efforts to enhance welcoming and to facilitate positive involvement must counter factors that make the setting uninviting and develop ways to make it attractive. This task can be viewed as the welcoming or invitation problem. From a psychological perspective, the welcoming problem is enmeshed with attitudes of school staff, students, and parents about involving new students and families. Welcoming is facilitated when attitudes are positive, and positive attitudes seem most likely when those concerned perceive personal benefits as outweighing potential costs.

A prime focus in addressing welcoming is on ensuring that most communications and interactions between school personnel and students and families convey a welcoming tone. This is accomplished through formal communications to students and families, procedures for reaching out to individuals, and informal interactions. The following are some general strategies for making initial contacts welcoming:

• Set up a welcoming table (identified with a welcome sign) at the front entrance to the school, and recruit and train volunteers to meet and greet everyone who comes through the door.

• Plan with the office staff ways to meet and greet strangers (by smiling and being inviting). Provide them with welcoming materials and information sheets regarding registration steps (with translations as appropriate). Encourage the use of volunteers in the office so that there are sufficient resources to take the time to greet and assist new students and families. It helps to have a designated registrar and even designated registration times.

• Prepare a welcoming booklet that clearly says "Welcome" and provides

some helpful information about who's who at the school, what types of assistance are available to new students and families, and tips about how the school runs. (Avoid using this as a place to lay down the rules; this can be rather an uninviting first contact.) Prepare other materials to assist students and families in making the transition and connecting with ongoing activities.

• Establish a student welcoming club (perhaps train the student council or leadership class to take this on as a special project). These students can provide tours and some orientation for new students, including an initial introduction to key staff at the school as feasible.

• Establish a welcoming club consisting of parents and volunteers to provide regular tours and orientations for new parents, including an initial introduction to key staff at the school as feasible. A welcoming video can be developed as useful aid.

• Dedicate a bulletin board somewhere near the entrance to the school that says "Welcome" and includes such things as pictures of school staff, a diagram of the school and its facilities, pictures of students who entered the school during the past one or two weeks, information on tours and orientations, special meetings for new students and families, and so forth.

• Each teacher should have several students who are willing and able to greet strangers who come to the classroom. Recent arrivals often are interested in welcoming the next set of new enrollees.

• Each teacher should have a plan for assisting new students and families in making a smooth transition into the class. This plan should include a process for introducing the student to the others in the class as soon as the new student arrives. Some teachers may want to arrange with the office specified times for bringing a new student to the classroom. An introductory wel-

coming conference should be conducted with the student and family as soon as feasible. A useful welcoming aid is to present both the student and the family member with welcoming folders or some other welcoming gift such as coupons from local businesses that have adopted the school.

• In addition to the classroom greeter, the teacher should have several students who are willing and able to be a special buddy to a new student for a couple of weeks and hopefully a regular buddy thereafter. This buddy can provide the type of social support that allows the new student to learn about the school culture and to become involved in various activities.

• Establish a way for representatives of organized student and parent groups to make direct contact with new students and families to invite them to learn about activities and to assist them in joining in when they find activities that appeal to them.

• Establish groups designed to help new students and families learn about the community and the school and to allow them to express concerns and have them addressed. Such groups also allow new students and families to connect with each other as another form of social support.

• Develop a variety of ways students and their families can feel an ongoing connection with the school and classroom (for example, opportunities to volunteer help, positive feedback regarding participation, letters home that tell all about what's happening).

An early emphasis in addressing the welcoming problem should be on establishing formal processes that convey a general sense of welcome to all and extend a personalized invitation to those who appear to need something more. In this respect, communications and invitations to students and their families come in two forms: (1) general communications (for example, oral and written communications when a new

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student registers, classroom announce-
ments, mass distribution of flyers or
newsletters) and (2) special, personal-
ized contacts (for example, personal
conferences and notes from the
teacher).

For those who are not responsive to
general invitations, the next logical step
is to extend special invitations and in-
crease personalized contact. Special in-
vitations are directed at designated in-
dividuals, are intended to overcome
personal attitudinal barriers, and can
be used to elicit information about
other persisting barriers.

***Providing Social Supports and Fa-
cilitating Involvement.*** Social supports
and specific processes to facilitate in-
volvement are necessary to address bar-
riers, to sanction the participation of
new students and families in any op-
tion to the degree each finds feasible
(for example, legitimizing initial mini-
mal degrees of involvement and fre-
quent changes in area of involvement),
to account for cultural and individual
diversity, to enable participation of
those with minimal skills, and to pro-
vide social and academic supports to
improve participation skills. In all these
facilitative efforts, peers (students and
parents) who are actively involved at
the school can play a major role as
welcomers and mentors.

If a new student or family seems
extremely reluctant about school in-
volvement, exceptional efforts may be
required. In cases where the reluctance
stems from skill deficits (for example,
an inability to speak English or lack of
social or functional skills), providing
special assistance with skills is a rela-
tively direct approach to pursue. How-
ever, all such interventions must be
pursued in ways that minimize stigma
and maximize positive attitudes. About
half of those who enter late in the school
year seem especially isolated and in
need of very personalized outreach ef-
forts. In such instances, designated peer
buddies reach out and personally in-

vite new students and parents who seem
not to be making a good transition;
they arrange to spend time with each
individual introducing him or her to
others and to activities in the school
and community.

At some sites, newcomers are of-
fered a mutual interest group composed
of others with the same cultural back-
ground or a mutual support group (for
example, a bicultural transition group
for students or parents [Cardenas, Tay-
lor, & Adelman, 1993] or a parent self-
help group [Simoni & Adelman, 1993]).
Parent groups might even meet away
from the school at a time when working
parents can participate. The school's
role would be to help initiate the groups
and provide consultation as needed. It
is important to provide regular oppor-
tunities for students, families, and staff
to share their heritage and interests and
celebrate the cultural and individual
diversity of the school community.

Maintaining Involvement. As dif-
ficult as it is to involve some newcom-
ers initially, maintaining their involve-
ment may be even a more difficult
matter. Maintaining involvement can
be seen as a problem of providing con-
tinuous support for learning, growth,
and success, including feedback about
how involvement is personally benefi-
cial, and minimizing feelings of incom-
petence and being blamed, censured,
or coerced.

Case Examples

Prototype

Jose and his family came to enroll at
the school in March. The family had
just moved into the area. As Jose and
his mother entered the building, they
were greeted at the front entrance by a
parent volunteer. She was seated at a
table above which was a brightly col-
ored sign proclaiming "Welcome to
Midvale St. School" (the words were
translated into other languages com-
mon in the community). On hearing

that the family was there to enroll Jose, the volunteer gave them a welcoming brochure with some basic information about the school and the steps for enrollment. Jose's mother indicated she had not brought all the documentation that the brochure said was needed, such as evidence of up-to-date immunizations. The volunteer worked with her to identify where to obtain what she lacked and gave her some of the registration material to fill out at home. A plan was made for them to return with the necessary material.

The next day Jose was enrolled. He and his mother were introduced to the principal and several other school staff, all of whom greeted them warmly. Then Jose was escorted to his class. The teacher also greeted him warmly and introduced him to the class; she asked one of the designated welcoming buddies to sit with him. This peer welcomer explained about the class and told Jose he would show him around, introduce him to others, and generally help him make a good start over the next few days.

Meanwhile, back in the office, Jose's mother was talking with a parent volunteer who was explaining about the school, the local community, and the various ways parents were involved at the school. She was encouraged to pick out an activity that interested her, and she was told someone else who was involved in that activity would call her to invite her to attend.

Over the next week, Jose and his family received a variety of special invitations to be part of the school community. After a few weeks, Jose and his family were contacted to be certain that they felt they had made a successful transition into the school.

Importance of Follow-up

The case of Jessica illustrates the role of welcoming follow-up strategies in helping establish the need to address significant social and emotional problems interfering with school adjustment. When a follow-up interview was conducted with Jessica, she indicated that the other children were picking on her. She also said she was having trouble with reading. A check with her teacher confirmed the situation; Jessica was seen as sad and depressed. It was decided that a trained volunteer supervised by a social worker would be assigned to provide additional support with a specific focus on social and emotional concerns.

As Jessica warmed to the volunteer, she began to tell about how she, her mother, and her younger brothers had all been physically abused by her father. She had also witnessed his drug dealing and finally his murder. The volunteer informed her supervisor, who made an independent assessment and concluded there was a clear need for therapeutic intervention. The social worker made a referral and coordinated a plan of action between the therapist and the involved school staff. A priority was placed on ensuring that Jessica would have a safe, supportive environment at school. Over the ensuing months, Jessica came to feel more secure and indicated she felt that way; those working with her agreed. As the volunteer working with her put it, Jessica was now "shining—looking brilliant."

How Follow-up Changes Perspective

Another poignant example is seen in the case of a family recently arrived from Mexico. The mother was a single parent trying to support two sons. Both boys had difficulty adjusting at school, especially Jaime, who was in the sixth grade. He had little previous schooling and could not read or handle school task expectations. Follow-up indicated that he was frequently absent. His teacher felt the mother was not committed to getting the boys to school. "I understand they go to the beach!" the teacher reported with some affect.

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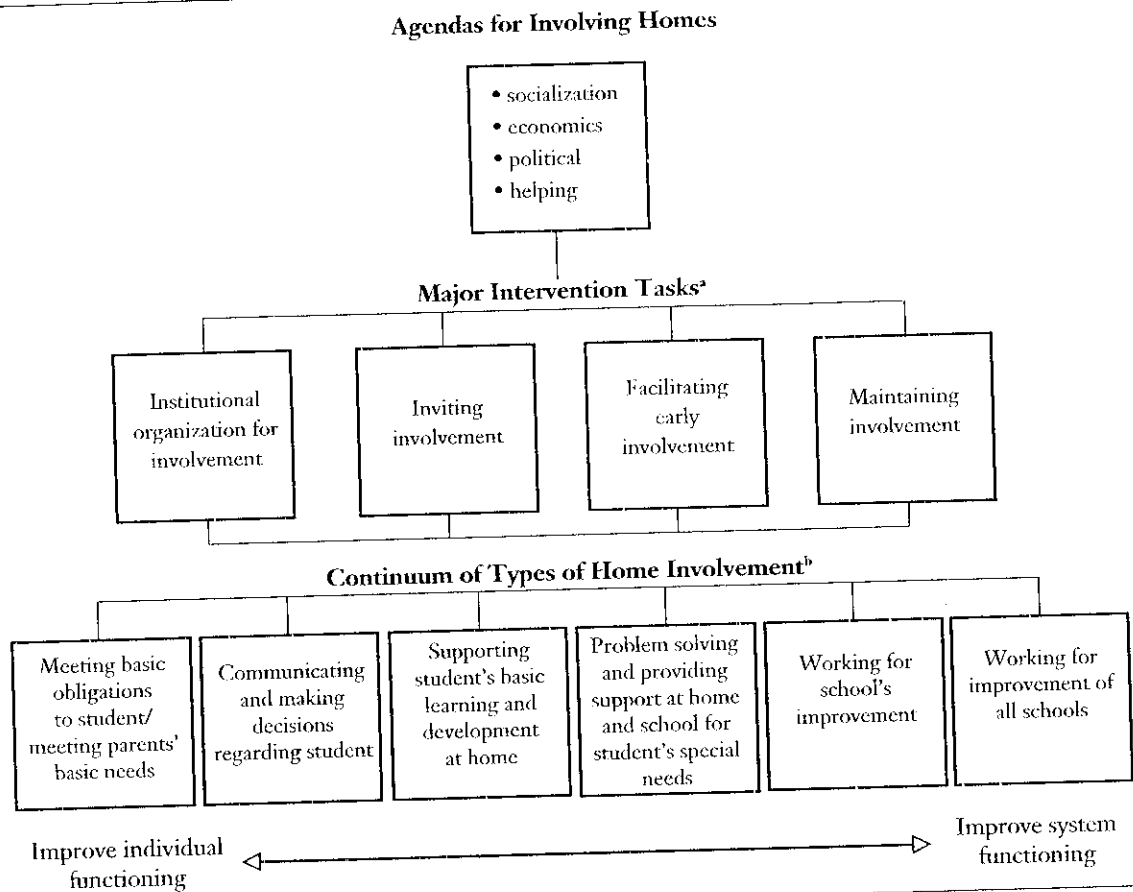iteer working with
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The principal decided that the prob-
lem warranted a home visit from a
school social worker. The family lived
in cramped quarters in a "residential
hotel" about six blocks from the school.
During the visit, the mother confided
she was ill and would soon have gall
bladder surgery. She also explained that
Jaime went to the beach to search for
aluminum cans as a source of family
income.

With awareness of the family's
plight, the perception of the school
staff, especially Jaime's teacher, shifted.
No one now believed the family did
not care about schooling, and proactive
steps were introduced to provide as-
sistance. The school called on the Par-
ent Teacher Association and a local
merchant to provide some food and
clothing. The social worker assisted
the mother in making plans for the
boys' care during her hospitalization.
Volunteers were recruited to assist the
boys with their classroom tasks. Both
boys were enrolled in the after-school
program, where they made new friends
during play activities and also received
assistance with homework. Subsequent
follow-up found significant improve-
ments in attendance and performance.
Toward the end of the year, a counse-
lor worked with the middle school
Jaime would be attending to ensure
there would be continued support for
him and his mother during this next
major transition.

Special Focus on Home Involvement

A critical element in establishing a
positive sense of community at a school
and in facilitating students' school
adjustment and performance is the
involvement of families in schooling.
Parent involvement in schools is a
prominent item on the education re-
form agenda for the 1990s (Comer,
1984; Haynes, Comer, & Hamilton-
Lee, 1989; Jackson & Cooper, 1989;
Marockie & Jones, 1987; Nicolau &

Ramos, 1990). It is, of course, not a
new concern. As Davies (1987) re-
minded us, the "questions and conflict
about parent and community relation-
ships to schools began in this country
when schools began" (p. 147).

A review of the literature on par-
ents and schooling indicates wide-
spread endorsement of parent involve-
ment. As Epstein (1987) noted,

> the recent acknowledgements of
> the importance of parent involve-
> ment are built on research find-
> ings accumulated over two de-
> cades that show that children have
> an advantage in school when their
> parents encourage and support
> their school activities. . . . The
> evidence is clear that parental en-
> couragement, activities, and in-
> terest at home and participation
> in schools and classrooms affect
> children's achievements, atti-
> tudes, and aspirations, even after
> student ability and family socio-
> economic status are taken into
> account. (pp. 119–120)

With respect to students with school
problems, parent involvement has been
mostly discussed in legal terms (for
example, participation in the individu-
alized education plan process). There
has been little systematic attention paid
to the value of and ways to involve the
home in the efforts to improve student
achievement. The terms "parent in-
volvement" and even "family involve-
ment" are too limiting. Given extended
families and the variety of child care-
takers, involvement of the home is the
minimum required.

To involve the home, a staff mem-
ber must reach out to parents and en-
courage them to drop in, be volun-
teers, go on field trips, participate in
publishing a community newsletter, or-
ganize social events, plan and attend
learning workshops, meet with the
teacher to learn more about their

child's curriculum and interests, and establish family social networks. It is imperative that the only contact with parents not be when they are called in to discuss their child's learning or behavior difficulties. Parents who feel unwelcome or feel scolded cannot be expected to view the school as an inviting setting.

In keeping with the increased focus on enhancing home involvement in schools and schooling, project staff have worked to expand understanding of the concepts and processes involved in doing so (Early Assistance for Students and Families Project, 1993b; also see Adelman, 1994). Figure 1 provides a graphic outline of major facets dealt

Figure 1

Enhancing Home Involvement: Intent, Intervention Tasks, and Ways Parents and Families Might Be Involved

Agendas for Involving Homes

- socialization
- economics
- political
- helping

Major Intervention Tasks[a]

| Institutional organization for involvement | Inviting involvement | Facilitating early involvement | Maintaining involvement |

Continuum of Types of Home Involvement[b]

| Meeting basic obligations to student/ meeting parents' basic needs | Communicating and making decisions regarding student | Supporting student's basic learning and development at home | Problem solving and providing support at home and school for student's special needs | Working for school's improvement | Working for improvement of all schools |

Improve individual functioning ⟵——————————⟶ Improve system functioning

SOURCE: Adelman, H S. (1994). Intervening to enhance home involvement in schooling *Intervention in Schools and Clinics, 29,* 285. © 1994, PRO-ED, Inc. Reprinted by permission.

[a]Although the tasks remain constant, the breadth of intervention focus can vary over three sequential phases: (1) broadband contacts focused on those who are receptive, (2) personalized contacts added for those who need a little inducement, and (3) intensive special contacts added for those who are extremely unreceptive.

[b]Besides participating in different types of home involvement, participants differ in the frequency, level, quality, and impact of their involvement.

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with in this area. As is illustrated by the figure, schools determined to enhance home involvement must be clear as to their intent and the types of involvement they want to foster. Then, they must establish and maintain mechanisms to carry out intervention phases and tasks in a sequential manner.

Conclusion

The intervention described in this article was developed in a multidisciplinary effort that included social workers, educators, and psychologists, along with parents and students. Throughout the process, however, great care has been taken to avoid conveying any sense that development and implementation of such programs requires specialist personnel. Helping students and their families make a new start at a new school is the responsibility of everyone at the site, and the task of ensuring that programs are in place can be carried out by a variety of school staff. Social workers, of course, are uniquely equipped to lead the way.

How well a school addresses the problems of welcoming and involving new students and families is an important qualitative indicator of program adequacy and staff attitudes and, thus, is a probable predictor of efficacy. Programs and related mechanisms and processes for addressing these problems can be viewed as essential to any effort to restructure schools.

Interventions to enhance welcoming and home involvement are as complex as any other psychological and educational intervention. Clearly, such activity requires considerable time, space, materials, and competence, and these ingredients are purchased with financial resources. Basic staffing must be underwritten. Additional staff may be needed; at the very least, teachers, specialists, and administrators need "released" time. Furthermore, if such interventions are to be planned, implemented, and evaluated effectively, those given the responsibility will require instruction, consultation, and supervision.

The success of programs to enhance welcoming and home involvement is first and foremost in the hands of policy-makers. If these programs are to be more than another desired but unachieved set of aims of educational reformers, policy-makers must understand the nature and scope of what is involved. A comprehensive intervention perspective makes it evident that although money alone cannot solve the problem, money is a necessary prerequisite. It is patently unfair to hold school personnel accountable for yet another major reform if they are not given the support necessary for accomplishing it. In an era when new sources of funding are unlikely, such programs must be assigned a high priority and funds must be reallocated in keeping with the level of priority. To do less is to guarantee the status quo. ∎

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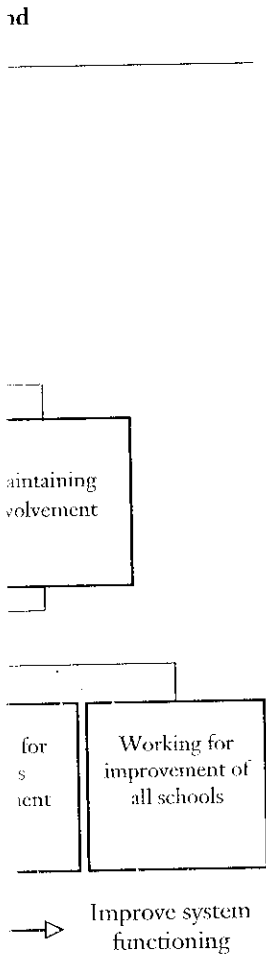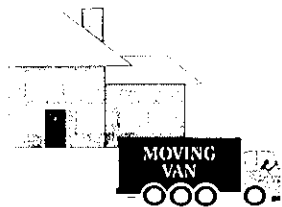
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