

Lessons Learned

Toward Improving Home Involvement in Schooling



Currently, all school districts are committed to some form of parent involvement. However, we have learned the hard way that the term means different things in different schools and among the various stakeholders at any school. There are two lessons that seem fundamental.

First, we find that most efforts to involve parents seem aimed at those who want and are able to show up at school. It's important to have activities for such parents. It's also important to remember that they represent the smallest percentage of parents at most schools. What about 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 who are even less motivated to become involved. Typically, a parent of such a youngster is called to school because of the child's problems and leaves with a sense of frustration, anger, and guilt. Not surprisingly, such a parent subsequently tries to avoid the school 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.

A second basic lesson learned is that in many homes mothers or fathers are not the key to whether a youngster does well at school. Many youngsters do not even live with their parents. Besides those placed in foster care, it is common for children to live with grandparents, aunts, or older siblings. Moreover, even when a youngster is living with one or more parents, an older sibling may have the greatest influence over how seriously the individual takes school. Given these realities, we use the term home involvement and try to design involvement programs for whoever is the key influence in the home.

Home involvement is a basic area for enabling learning (see pages 8 and 10-12). Schools must develop programs to address the many barriers associated with the home and the many barriers in the way of home involvement. Unfortunately, as with other facets of enabling learning, limited finances often mean verbal commitments are not backed up with adequate resources. Meaningful home involvement requires on-site decision makers to commit fully. This means creating and maintaining effective mechanisms for program development and overcoming barriers related to home involvement.

There are many ways to think about an appropriate range of activities. We find it useful to differentiate whether the focus is on improving the functioning of individuals (students, parent/caretaker), systems (classroom, school, district), or both. And with respect to those individuals with the greatest impact on the youngster, we distinguish between efforts designed mainly to support the school's instructional mission and those intended primarily to provide family assistance (see figure).

Improve individual

- *meeting basic obligations to the functioning student/helping caretakers meet their own basic needs

- *communicating about matters essential to the student

- *making essential decisions about the student

- *supporting the student's *basic* learning and development at home

- *solving problems and providing support at home and at school re. the student's *special* needs

- *working for a classroom's/school's improvement

Improve system

functioning

- *working for improvement of all schools

A Few Resources

Just out:

From Parent Involvement to Parent Empowerment and Family Support -- A resource guide for school community leaders -- Using the nationally-acclaimed RAINMAKER program as a centerpiece, this resource outlines a philosophy that calls for restructuring the way educators and families work together, defines roles for each, highlights parent-run Family Resource Centers, provides an overview of a step-by-step model of training for parents, covers matters related to funding, and much more. By Briar-Lawson, Lawson, Rooney, Hansen, White, Radina, & Herzog. Available from the Institute for Educational Renewal. Ph: 513/529-6926.

Available from our Center:

An introductory packet on: *Parent and Home Involvement in Schools* -- Provides an overview of how home involvement is conceptualized and outlines current models and basic resources. Issues of special interest to underserved families are addressed

A technical aid packet on: *Guiding Parents in Helping Children Learn* -- Contains (1) a "booklet" to help nonprofessionals understand what is involved in helping children learn, (2) info about basic resources to draw on to learn more about helping parents and other nonprofessionals enhance children's learning, and (3) info on other resources parents can use.