

Parent Involvement at the Secondary Level

Nancy P. Kraft, Ph.D. Director of the Kansas Parent Information Resource Center

The research is consistent on one point – parent involvement does make a difference! When parents are involved there is an impact on student achievement (Henderson & Mapp, 2002). Specifically, adolescents whose parents attend school functions receive higher grades and test scores than those whose parents do not attend. When parents are involved students generally have better attendance and get more homework done. Other benefits to parent involvement include fewer placements in special education and students with more positive attitudes and behavior. Other research shows that when there is on-going communication and discussion among high school students, parents, and educators about academic matters and post-secondary opportunities for children and youth, that this will increase students' chances of enrollment in post-secondary training (Plank & Jordan, 1997). What is most significant about the research on parent involvement is that when schools support and encourage parents to volunteer or participate in school decision making, more families will be involved regardless of their own formal education or their socio-economic status.

Four practices of parent involvement decline significantly between grades six and twelve: 1) discussions that parents have with their children concerning homework; 2) discussions that parents have with their children about school and school work; 3) parental assistance with homework; and 4) attendance at school meetings and events. But sustaining parent involvement beyond the early elementary years of children's schooling is often a difficult and challenging proposition due to many factors such as the organizational structure of high school mitigating against parent involvement; constraints on time and resources of parents – especially those from single-parent households; and barriers of culture and class. The latest reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education

Act – No child Left Behind (NCLB) – however, requires that schools do whatever they can to facilitate parent involvement. This is the first time, in the 40 year history of this legislation that parent involvement has been defined as:

“The participation of parents in regular, two-way, and meaningful communication involving student academic learning and other school activities including ensuring that parents: 1) play an integral role in assisting their child’s learning; 2) are encouraged to be actively involved in their child’s education at school; 3) are full partners in their child’s education and are included, as appropriate, in decision making and on advisory committees to assist in the education of their child; and 4) the carrying out of other activities, such as those delineated in Title I, Section 1118 – which is a policy on parental involvement.”

Given the parent involvement mandate in NCLB, Henderson (2003) offers the following suggestions that schools might use to encourage and support parent involvement at the high school level:

- *Schools can build family capacity to support children’ learning*– this might involve working with community partners (i.e., adult literacy centers and/or early childhood programs such HeadStart, EvenStart, etc.) to ensure that families have access to family literacy programs, which also contribute to a family’s economic stability, if needed. In distressed communities schools might connect families to social service agencies and help families understand the system and how to make it work for them.
- *Schools can help families build social capital*– when schools serve as community meeting-places, and offer social activities (such as family fun nights, pot luck dinners, class meetings), they help foster the connections families need to collaborate in helping their children.

- *Schools can help families build political capital*– schools can facilitate parents' participation in public decisions so they can receive their fair share of resources and services.

Involving parents is not an impossible task – it only requires some careful thought and consideration. Steps to building a quality parent involvement program might include building trust and finding out what families want and need, and reaching out to parents and creating a safe place for families to gather at the school. It is also important to remember to involve the whole family (fathers, children, extended family members, etc.) and to help people connect to each other. But as with any program, it will be important to prepare parents and teachers to work together and to structure the school to promote those contacts.

Sources:

Henderson, A. (2003). *Engaging parents, Families and the Community To Improve Student Achievement*, Abbott Implementation Resource Guide, Washington, D.C.: Center for Law and Education.

Henderson, A. and Mapp, K. (2002). *A New Wave of Evidence: The Impact of School, Family, and Community Connections on Student Achievement*, Southwest Educational Development Laboratory: Austin, TX.

Plank, S. and Jordan, W. (2001). Effects of information, guidance, and actions on postsecondary destinations: A study of talent loss. *American Educational Research Journal*, 38(4).