

Engaging Families to Improve Achievement: Advice from the Research

Taken together, decades of research strongly suggest that families have a major influence on their children's achievement in school and through life. When schools support families to be involved at home and at school, students of all backgrounds achieve at higher levels. In short, when parents are involved in education, children do better in school, and schools get better.

According to a new review of recent research published by the Southwest Educational Development Laboratory (2002), students with involved parents are more likely to:

- Earn higher grades and test scores, and enroll in higher-level programs
- Be promoted, pass their classes and earn credits
- Attend school regularly
- Have better social skills, show improved behavior and adapt well to school
- Graduate and go on to post-secondary education

Key Findings

Families of all backgrounds are involved at home. Several studies show that families of all income and education levels, and from all ethnic and cultural groups, are engaged in supporting their children's learning *at home*. White, middle-class families, however, tend to be more involved *at school*. Supporting more involvement at school from all families may be an important strategy for addressing achievement gaps.

Programs and special efforts to engage families make a difference. For example, teacher outreach to parents results in strong, consistent gains in student performance in both reading and math. Effective outreach practices include meeting face to face, sending learning materials home, and keeping in touch about progress. Workshops for parents on helping their children at home are linked to higher reading and math scores. Schools with highly rated partnership programs make greater gains on state tests than schools with lower-rated programs. Practices like these should be included in a school's parent involvement policy and school-parent compact.

Higher-performing schools effectively involve families and community Schools that succeed in engaging families from diverse backgrounds share three key practices:

- Focus on building trusting, collaborative relationships among teachers, families and community members
- Recognize, respect and address families' needs, as well as class and cultural differences
- Embrace a philosophy of partnership where power and responsibility are shared

Effective Practices

Directly link the school's parent involvement efforts to student learning.

- Include information on standards and exhibits of student work at open houses and back-to-school nights.

- Engage parents and students in math and reading games at Family Nights. Explain where students' skills need to be stronger. Use scoring guides while making craft projects, to let parents know how to use them.
- Use the school newsletter to discuss test results and what students are doing to meet higher standards
- Use the annual school and district Report Cards as a chance to have focused conversations with parents and community members about each school's strengths and weaknesses — and how teachers, parents and community members can work together to make improvements.

Match practices to grade levels. Features from programs that are linked to gains in children's learning take children's age and developmental needs into account.

1. *Families with young children:*

- Home visits from trained parent educators with cultural backgrounds similar to their own, or with knowledge of their culture
- Lending libraries that offer games and learning materials to build skills at home
- Discussion groups with other families about children's learning
- Classes on how to stimulate their children's mental, physical and emotional development

2. *Families of elementary and middle school students:*

- Interactive homework that involves parents with their children's learning
- Workshops on topics that parents suggest, like building their children's vocabulary, positive discipline strategies, and supporting children through crises
- Regular calls from teachers, not just when there are problems, about how their children are doing in class
- Learning packets in reading, science and math, with training in how to use them
- Meetings with teachers to talk about their children's progress and what they're learning

3. *Families of high school students:*

- Regular meetings with teachers and counselors to plan their children's academic program
- Information about program options, graduation requirements, test schedules, and post-secondary education options and how to plan for them
- Information about where to find academic support, such as help with homework, tutoring, afterschool programs, and special classes. Include subject areas covered and associated costs.
- Explanations of courses students should take to be prepared for college or other post-secondary education
- Information about financing post-secondary education and applying for financial aid

Facilitate transitions. Children of all ages do better when they make a solid adjustment to school. By adjustment, we mean that students feel comfortable and

respected, feel they belong at school, and feel supported by teachers. Here are some practices that research suggests help students adjust as they enter a new school:

- Offer families and students tours of the school and opportunities to visit and observe in the classrooms.
- Meet with students and families at the feeder schools or programs to introduce staff, explain the school's programs, and answer questions.
- Make home visits the summer before school starts to begin building a relationship with each family.
- Work with families to prepare children for the next level and help them plan for postsecondary education and a career.

Develop families' sense of confidence and power. Researchers call this "efficacy." Studies find that when parents have a sense of confidence and power, their children do better in school. For example, we want parents to feel they can help their children do well in school, and be happy and safe. We also want parents to feel that they can overcome negative influences on their children (such as violence and drugs), and have a positive impact on the school and neighborhood. Many practices that help empower families, such as these listed here, are required by the No Child Left Behind law.

- Engage families in planning how they would like to be involved at school.
- Consult a representative sample of parents and families, not just the PTO leadership, about school policies and proposed actions.
- Involve families in action research. Ask them to develop and conduct surveys of other families. Invite them to observe in the classroom, review books and materials, and visit other schools to gather ideas.
- Make it easy for parents to meet and discuss concerns with the principal, talk to teachers and guidance counselors, and examine their children's school records.
- Invite families to attend staff development sessions and faculty meetings.
- Facilitate families' connections with youth groups and programs for young people.
- Work with families to help them monitor their children's activities. Create a school directory, so they can contact other parents.
- Offer workshops on communicating with their children, about topics they suggest, such as talking with children about drugs, dating, problems with friends or family, and values

Support families' efforts to improve the school and community. When parents feel they have the power to change and control their circumstances, their children tend to do better in school. Their parents are also better equipped to help them. When schools work with families to develop their connections, families become powerful allies of the school and advocates for public education.

- Give families information about how the education system (and local government) works. Make field trips to district offices and school board meetings.
- Keep voter registration forms and information about local government agencies in the school office or family center. Develop a student-run voter registration drive.

- Invite candidates for school board and other local offices to speak to families at the school.
- Open the school to community meetings.
- Go with families to press local officials about needed funding, programs or law enforcement.
- Work with families to develop action research skills to document problems in the neighborhood.
- Invite local banks and businesses to talk with families about their services, loan programs, and employment opportunities

Develop the capacity of school staff to work with families and community members. All school staff, from the principal to the custodian, need opportunities to learn more about working more effectively with parents and community members. Design educational opportunities for *all* school staff that:

- Help staff recognize the advantages of school, family and community connections
- Explore how trusting and respectful relationships with families and community members are achieved
- Enhance school staff's ability to work with diverse families
- Enable staff to make connections with community resources
- Explore the benefits of sharing power with families and community members.

Work with local after-school programs and supplemental service providers to link their content to what students are learning in class.

- Form a partnership between after-school program staff and teachers. Encourage them to share ideas and knowledge about the students, observe each other at work, and attend staff development sessions to update and build their teaching skills.
- Inform supplemental service providers about the school's curriculum and learning programs (especially math and reading)
- Share textbooks and other learning materials with program staff.
- Give program staff information about students' progress and academic needs

From *A New Generation of Evidence: The Family is Critical to Student Achievement*, by Anne T. Henderson and Nancy Berla (Washington, DC: Center for Law and Education, 1994) and *A New Wave of Evidence: The Impact of School, Family and Community Connections on Student Achievement*, by Anne T. Henderson and Karen L. Mapp (Austin, TX: Southwest Educational Development Laboratory, 2002 – in press).