Rethinking Parent Involvement

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While the "ideal parent" is a rarity, schools can do much to increase parental involvement. Results from the Arizona At-Risk Pilot Project suggest the importance of "meeting parents where they are."

Photo by Mike Ogburn

Improving parent involvement, particularly among at-risk populations, is one of the most challenging tasks facing educators today. For many parents, school brings back memories of their own failure. Some feel uncomfortable, embarrassed, even guilty when they walk into a school. Others do not feel valued by the schools. Feelings of inadequacy, shyness or resentment, longing or fear . . . every parent has his or her own story to tell.

As external evaluators for parent involvement programs in 55 primary and secondary schools throughout Arizona, we at the Morrison Institute for Public Policy have talked with hundreds of parents as well as teachers and administrators. We are now in our fourth year of observing pilot sites, which, to receive funding from the Arizona At-Risk Pilot Project, must improve parental involvement as well as provide direct services to at-risk students.

Defining Parent Involvement

Although the pilot projects were required to "involve" parents, involvement was not predefined. Each district used different strategies. Initiatives typical across the country—workshops, classes, social events, newsletters, take-home activities, home visits, volunteer programs, advisory committees, counseling, support groups, clothing banks—were offered in various combinations.

After one year of implementing programs, hundreds of teachers we surveyed responded overwhelmingly that parent involvement had not improved significantly. "We offer wonderful events, but families don't come" was a typical comment. In trying to understand why this was so, we realized that we had a fundamental problem: schools don't always know what parent involvement *really* means.

One popular notion is that parents are "involved" when they actively participate in school-sponsored activities (for example, come to PTA meetings) or help their children in ways visible to their children and others (read to them or assist with homework).

This idea has two key elements. First, parents are *supportive*. They encourage their children and are sympathetic, reassuring, and understanding. They show a high level of commitment to their children and their education. Second, parents are *active*. They are doing something that is observable. This combination of level of *commitment* and active *participation* is what makes an "involved" parent.

No wonder many schools responded that they had not improved parent involvement. They were looking at how many more parents actively participated in and supported the

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school by coming to parent training workshops, reading in the classrooms, helping their children do homework, attending parent advisory committee meetings—all activities requiring high levels of commitment and participation.

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Schools with large at-risk populations, we found, have parents who display a broad spectrum of involvement: parents who are committed to their children but do not participate, those who participate but are not necessarily supportive, and parents who neither support nor participate in their child's education. In rethinking parent involvement, we found we could better evaluate the degree of involvement by separating the notions of support and participation (see fig. 1 for four basic "types" of parents). Both support and participation fall along a continuum of involvement.

1. As the chart depicts, at one end of the spectrum are parents who are both supportive and willing to participate (+,+). They are likely to attend workshops and conferences, respond to notes and phone calls, and get involved in decision-making roles through advisory committees and planning teams. However, this is not a comfortable role for many parents, nor should it necessarily be considered the ultimate goal of parent involvement.

2. Some parents simply are not "joiners," even though they may care deeply about their child's education (+,-). For them, several kinds of approaches hold promise. Newsletters with suggestions for home activities have proven to be successful, as have school-based activities where there is "safety in numbers" (for example, "make-and-take" workshops) and meeting parents on their own turf through home visits.

3. Perhaps a rarer parent—and the most difficult type to identify—is the one who pays lip service to education by attending events, but is not supportive at home (-,+). A mother, for example, may attend a parent-teacher conference only to go home and ignore or mistreat her child. This was the case with an abusive father who maintained his image by attending the school's ice cream social and pot-luck supper, only to send his 3rd grader to the dump on a nightly basis to collect tin cans. No cans—no supper.

One pilot program has found an effective way to break through to these parents. Under the supervision of the English department, older students in a drama group write and perform vignettes in which they act out their feelings and reflect the consequences of negative parental behavior. Their performances are part of an "Awards Night" program sponsored by the school. Our interviews with students reveal that many parents change their behaviors as a result of seeing kids' feelings enacted on stage.

4. Parents who are unsupportive and do not participate (-,-) are obviously the most difficult to reach, but perhaps the most important group on which to focus efforts to improve communication. First, it is essential to determine the basis for their lack of involvement. In many cases, the reasons stem from the fact that the parent's *own* problems take precedence over his or her child's education. If the situation involves an abusive environment, the only kind of solution possible may be to refer the parent to an outside agency. In the pilot programs, parent liaisons or advocates who provide one-on-one assistance have successfully addressed the needs of these parents.

Support Versus Involvement

Having refined our notion of parent involvement, we asked teachers about supportive parents and active parents. As we expected, lack of participation is a prevalent problem. But more disturbing is the number of parents who are perceived as *unsupportive* and the effect that this has on their children. These are the parents who are at risk themselves. They may be drug addicts, alcoholics, or child abusers. Or they may simply have bad memories of their own school experiences and denigrate the value of education in front of their children. We felt, as did the teachers we interviewed, that *garnering parent support*—for their children and for education—is a prerequisite for improving parent involvement. Further, we identified that the best way to elicit support is by improving communication.

Indeed, initial efforts to build support through improved communication with parents ultimately resulted in more involvement. One can't always measure this improvement by attendance at workshops or parenting classes—but it is obvious in interviews with parents. A Native American parent who had earlier had two children retained at school told us: "Years ago, I felt like I didn't belong here at the school. Now I do belong." Another rural parent told us: "At first, I went on a field trip. Then I was relaxed around the teachers, so I decided I wanted to help out in the classroom." An urban parent echoed this sentiment, "I have never felt so wanted." Another rural parent said: "My kids have gone to a lot of schools. There was never any reason to get involved. But here, the parent facilitator went from door to door. She kept coming to our house and saying: 'If you care, please come. This will help our kids.' . . . So now I volunteer."

Four Types of Parents

+ Supportive of child (for example, often encourages) + Active participant (for example, helps child with homework)	− Not supportive of child (for example, ignores child) + Active participant (for example, comes if food is provided)
+ Supportive of child (for example, cares for well-being) − Inactive participant (for example, rarely comes to school activities)	− Not supportive of child (for example, is abusive) − Inactive participant (for example, no communication with school)

Meeting Parents Where They Are

What is the key to improving communication? Meeting parents where they are.

A school in one of the most at-risk districts in the state realized that many of its parents fell into the category of nonsupportive, nonactive parents. In an area of high transience and drug trafficking—and located in a "red light" area of Phoenix with a high crime rate—this school originally planned its program around weekly workshops on "Good Parenting Skills." These workshops—offered in English in a district with a majority of native Spanish speakers—were poorly attended because they were not meeting the needs of the parent population.

Over time, program staff concluded that to effectively "involve" parents is to meet them where they are. Interviews with parents revealed that what they really wanted was to learn English, so the school revised its notion of parent involvement and responded to a real need by offering English as a Second Language (ESL) classes. Follow-up interviews with staff were revealing. Said one teacher: "Most parents starting out in the class have only a 2nd or 3rd grade education. Now they are reading in Spanish and English. These parents are excited about reading with their children."

The success of any one parent involvement strategy depends on how well it matches up with an individual parent's needs. The secret is to know who your parents are and to have in a school's repertoire as many options for involvement as possible. Doing so ensures an appropriate match between a parent's level of commitment and willingness *and ability* to be involved. Some parents may respond best to take-home activities or home visits that allow them to be involved without going to the school; others may appreciate the opportunity to make connections with other parents at the school through nonthreatening events such as awards nights and suppers.

Many schools have successfully hired parent advocates who help parents meet their own needs. Some of these liaisons are professional social workers or counselors; others are local residents who are parents themselves. Depending on the services offered, the latter have been extremely successful in working with parents of at-risk children.

"Mrs. Brown" is a case in point. A resident of the community for more than 30 years, she knows every family in her small school district. She also knows people to talk to at the local utility companies, the county hospital, the Department of Economic Security, the federal housing authority, residential and nonresidential treatment centers, and the community college. Mrs. Brown and her school district have recognized that it is impossible to solicit involvement from parents who are worried about their own survival. She has helped parents obtain bedding, clothes, food, medical care, and counseling. In addition, she has helped them register for GED and ESL classes at the college. Over time, Mrs. Brown has gained the trust of virtually every parent in the community. Parents associate her with the school and now feel more comfortable participating in other types of activities requiring more commitment (for example, as classroom volunteers).

Getting Off to a Good Start

While getting all parents actively involved in their children's education and the schools is a valuable goal, it may be an unrealistic starting point for improving parent involvement, especially among populations at risk.

Results from the Arizona At-Risk Pilot Project suggest that the most effective means to involve parents are ones that (1) establish a personal rapport between someone from the school and the parent and (2) do not initially require high levels of commitment or participation. Something as simple as a friendly conversation with the classroom teacher can go a long way toward building parent support.

The "ideal parent," one who is willing and able to participate and is committed to his or her child's education, is a rare breed among at-risk populations. But there are many things schools can do to improve parent involvement. Assess parents' needs. Get to know them individually. Offer a broad range of activities to encourage support and participation, including nonthreatening, low-commitment opportunities. Personalize home-school communications. Making parents feel comfortable is an important step toward improving parent involvement! ■

[1]See, for example, *Phi Delta Kappan*, (January 1991), 72, 5.

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