Effective Parent Involvement Programs

Dr. David Bartz
Professor Emeritus
Department of Educational Leadership
Eastern Illinois University, Charleston, IL
USA

Dr. E. Scott England
Superintendent
Fairfield Public School District 112, Fairfield, IL
USA

Dr. Patrick Rice
Director of Field Services
Illinois Association of School Boards, Springfield, IL
USA

Abstract

Effective parent involvement programs have tremendous potential for enhancing children's education and gaining the support of parents for the school and teachers. School personnel should take a broad perspective on parent involvement programs and ensure that the positive attributes of parents are incorporated into such programs. It is especially important for parents to have input for governance and decision-making functions of the school. The background, context, and perspectives of effective parent involvement programs are reviewed. Principles for developing an effective parent involvement program are discussed, and examples of basic program components and elements are addressed. The authors present the reflective thoughts pertaining to effective parent involvement programs.

Keywords: parent involvement programs, students' success at school, expectations of parents, school-centric parent involvement programs, and basic component of an effective parent involvement program

1.0 Background and Context of Parent Involvement

- Parents should be recognized as their children's first and most important teachers and the home is considered the first school a child attends.
- To work effectively with children, the sensitive teacher recognizes the importance of family involvement and understands a child's circumstances at home.
- It cannot be overemphasized how important it is that parents feel they belong in the school.
- Perceived meaningful participation by parents, through believing they have influence and input with school personnel about their children's education, leads to a commitment on their part to support the teacher and the school.[1]

There is an understandable tendency on the part of parents to view education as an extension of childrearing initiated in the home.

In so far as parents wish to have some control in the rearing of their children in the home, they also want to have some degree of input about the way their children are educated at school. It is crucial for school personnel to consistently help parents to realize the important role they play as the first teachers in their children's lives. Teachers need to respect the inherent value that parents have in their children's development, especially in the early years. As a child's first caregiver and teacher, a parent has both the right and the responsibility to be involved in the child's formal education (Rockwell, Andre, and Hawley, 2010).

Participation in activities, discussions, and decisions that are important to parents' interests regarding their children at school has often been viewed as an obligation and a right in our democratic society in the United States. Social and psychological research has demonstrated that parent participation and interaction with school personnel is a necessity for maximizing their children's education (Bartz, Rice, & Karnes, 2018). Effective parent involvement is associated with positive student motivation, higher grades and test scores, enhanced self-esteem, good attendance records, and an increased likelihood of attending college (Barton, 2003; Kowalski, 2011).

For parents to be fully involved in the educational process of their children, they need to feel that their interests and efforts will have an impact on that process. Parents tend to be supporters of the school and teachers to the degree that they participate significantly in what the school is endeavoring to accomplish with their children. School personnel should remember that parents are likely to be the most influential group regarding opinions on student learning and a school's quality image.

2.0 Perspectives on Parent Involvement Programs[2]

Parent involvement programs have been defined in many ways over recent decades (Bartz & Karnes, 2018). Parent involvement in a school-centric program often focuses primarily on parents volunteering at school, attending school meetings, and helping children with homework (Williams & Sanchez, 2012). Though each of these is important components of parent involvement, they do not represent all of the essential parent contributions.

School-centric parent involvement programs give most of the control to school personnel, thus limiting many positive attributes parents bring to working with teachers for the betterment of their children's education (Bartz, Collins-Ayanlaja, & Rice, 2017). Schools that utilize a school-centric approach to parent involvement often lack parent participation in important functions such as decision making and governance of the school operations (Bartz, Karnes, & Rice, 2018). A lack of parent involvement in decision making and governance can lead to councils, committees, and school improvement teams having a membership composed exclusively of school personnel with no input from parents. This can result in parents withdrawing from involvement with school personnel after recognizing the limited role allowed to them, resulting in a negative impact on their children's education.

A school-centric environment does not benefit from the resources and insights parents can provide, such as: (a) giving a context of how their children function outside of school on social, emotional, and developmental issues; (b) people in their social networks willing to help them with matters pertaining to their children's education and support the school's mission and vision; (c) advocacy by individuals from community groups for their children; (d) adults in their community willing to support them psychologically; (e) access to supplemental educational activities based outside of their children's school in the communities in which they reside; (f) medical and mental health information about their children; and (g) community agencies in their neighborhood available to provide supportive services to their children.

3.0 Context for Developing a Parent Involvement Program
An overriding goal of a parent involvement program should be to ensure that parents' attributes are not stereotyped or ignored, resulting in limiting the effectiveness of school personnel in working meaningfully with them and their children. School personnel must make sure that the school-centric approach to parent involvement does not prevail and that an inclusive approach that embraces full parent involvement is utilized.

It is essential that school personnel have a positive "outward mindset" toward the involvement of parents. The outward mindset is indicative of school personnel viewing the roles and attributes of parents as crucial to an effective parent involvement program and having meaningful communication with parents. School personnel exposing parents to positive experiences pertaining to their involvement is indicative of the outward mindset. The outward mindset represents the positive psychology movement that focuses on the assets people bring to a situation to make it successful (The Arbinger Institute, 2016).

A key element of improving education for children is the development of effective working relationships between parents (including educational activities in the home for children), the school and its personnel, and agencies and resources in the communities in which the children reside. In benefitting children, these relationships are akin to a three-legged stool. The stool functions best when all three legs are equal and effective in doing their part, as is the case with meaningful school-family-community partnerships.

The "no blame" philosophy of James Comer's approach to school improvement should be an essential part of a parent involvement program. It is counterproductive for individuals from any of the three entities—school personnel, parents, and community partners—to blame one another for the present situation. The "blame game" creates animosity and imperils meaningful working relationships (Yale School of Medicine, 2010).

Developing positive bonding relationships between parents, school personnel, and community members dramatically enhance the value of a parent involvement program. A trusting bond between the three entities is the foundation of working together effectively for the betterment of children. For maximum effectiveness, the purposes and functions of parent involvement must be perceived, similarly and compatibly, by school personnel, parents, and community members (Lawson, 2003).

Teachers sometimes view parents from low income and impoverished households negatively concerning their childrearing practices and the contributions the parents can make to their children's education (Grant & Ray, 2013). It is imperative that school personnel guard against this possible bias. Many children come from single-parent homes or what school personnel may perceive as nontraditional home environments. School personnel often use the childrearing practices they experienced as children as the "right way" to raise children. This is another potential bias that school personnel must avoid. School personnel should accept without bias that "parent" may refer to a single adult, to a couple of either gender, to other family members (such as grandparents, aunts, or older siblings), or to foster parents who serve in a parenting role (Rockwell, Andre, and Hawley, 2010).

School personnel may need to help some parents to develop a skill set that will assist in empowering them to maximize their contribution to the parent involvement program. Specifically:

3.1 Parent self-image and identity. This represents school personnel supporting parents to be self-confident and empowering them to believe they can make significant contributions for their children through the parent involvement program.

3.2 Locus of control. Since some parents may feel a sense of helplessness or that they can have little impact or control in the parent involvement process, school personnel must "lift them up" and show how they can make valuable contributions.

3.3 Parenting development and maturity. This requires school personnel to provide information and insights to parents that, if needed, show parents that they can continue to develop parenting skills over time and "grow" in this area (Rockwell, Andre, and Hawley, 2010).

4.0 Example of Basic Components of

Parent Involvement Program

In addition to the previously-mentioned content for effective parent programs, the following information provides examples of a program's component and elements.[3]

1. Recognize the basic obligations of families
- Provide for children's health and safety
- Develop parenting skills that prepare children for school
- Build positive home conditions that support school learning and behavior
- Provide a warm, caring, and loving environment
- Understand developmental levels of children as they progress in age
- Provide for a nutritional diet and other physical needs

2. Recognize basic communication obligations of schools
- Make sure all communications are respectful of parents' roles in their children's education, at home and school
- Develop videos and other social media information highlighting school events, teachers, and available resources

- Use Facebook, emails, texts, and tweets (do not assume, though, that all parents have access or will use them)
- Provide a personal greeting/welcome packet for new parents
- Provide families with information about age-appropriate cognitive, social, and psychological development activities for their children
- Communicate with families about school programs and children's progress
- When interacting face-to-face with parents, practice open two-way communication and mutual respect
- Be excellent listeners
- Ensure written communications are clear and free from educational jargon
- Communicate with parents about good behavior and academic successes, not just negative happenings
- Make sure that no "bureaucratic hurdles" prevent effective communication and participation
- Strive to make parents feel comfortable when communicating with school personnel in the context of understanding that, based on past experiences as students, they may have feelings of alienation
- Understand the challenges faced by single parents, grandparents, Godparents, foster parents and other caregivers regarding participation

3. Recognize involvement at school by parents

- Conduct open house events that have "make-it and take-it" activities which provide parents with materials and insights pertaining to home-based learning
- Involve parents in assisting with fundraising activities, including planning
- Use parents to help as volunteers in classrooms or other areas of the school
- Conduct workshops for parents (and include them in the planning) focused on interests and issues relevant to their children's educational needs
- Use parents as volunteers to be greeters at school events
- Involve parents in children's school activities
- Have a parent area in the school with coffee, snacks, educational materials, and information related to their children (also display artwork and other materials produced by children in this area)
- Have parents accompany students and school staff on field trips
- Provide a wide range of times for parent involvement to increase the likelihood that parents are able to participate
- Have opportunities for parents to see children perform at school, in their immediate neighborhood/community, and at places such as malls in the greater geographical area (assist with transportation, when needed)

4. Recognize involvement in learning activities at home

- Assist parents with learning activities at home that are coordinated with children's classwork
- Assist parents to better utilize their energies on activities at home that are suitable and accomplishable within children's daily routines
- Provide easy access to parents knowing specific homework assignments for their children
- Provide parents with information, resources, and skills related to helping their children at home and understanding the expectations of each grade level
- Link parents to community agencies that will assist them with home-based educational activities for their children

5. Provide involvement in decision making, governance, and advocacy

- Involve parents in school committees such as PTAs, advisory councils, school improvement teams, and independent advocacy groups
- Have school policies that are easy for parents to understand and a means for them to provide feedback

- Involve parents in advocacy lobbying efforts at local, state, and federal levels
- Seek suggestions from parents for input in school and district policies and procedures

6. Utilize collaboration and exchanges with community organizations

- Connect parents with agencies, businesses, and other groups that support their children's educational activities at school
- Utilize community resources that aid parents who do not have a means of transportation or child care for siblings and which prevent them from being involved
- Work with public libraries to support and assist parents with educational materials for their children
- Work with organizations that provide food and nutritional assistance

5.0 Our Reflective Thoughts

Participation in activities, discussions, and decisions that are important to parents' interests regarding their children at school has often been viewed as an obligation and a right in our democratic society in the United States. Parents, whether formally trained or not, are their children's first teachers. It is important for school personnel to consistently reinforce to parents the important role they play as the first teachers in their children's lives.

For parents to fully involve themselves in the educational process of their children, they need to feel that their interest and efforts will have an impact. Parents tend to be supporters of the school and teachers to the degree that they participate significantly in what the school is endeavoring to accomplish with their children. If parents perceive that school personnel does not want them to be meaningfully involved in matters such as decision making and governance, they are less likely to participate in other aspects of the parent involvement programs. It is imperative that educators adopt an outward mindset and the ability to see the intrinsic value of collaborating as equals with parents. This will strengthen a school's parent involvement program as opposed to a school-centric approach which limits essential forms of parent involvement.

When educators, parents, and students work together and "pull in a common direction," good things happen for students. As the proverb reminds us, "Many hands make light the work." Building synergy among school personnel, parents, and community agencies will help to establish high expectations that will build positive relationships beneficial to students. High expectations and a caring relationship with children are vital ingredients for maximizing student achievement.

6.0 Footnotes

[1]Hoerr, T.R. (2017, March). Connecting with students' parents. *Educational Leadership*, 74(6), pp. 88-89; Rockwell, R.E., Andre, L.C., & Hawley, M.K. (2010). *Families and educators as partners, 2nd edition*. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth.

[2]Portions of the following may appear in Bartz, D.E. & Karnes, C. (2018). Effective parent involvement/family engagement programs. *National Forum Teacher Education Journal*, 28(3), 1-14.

[3] Epstein, J.L. (2011). *School, family, and community partnerships: Preparing educators and improving schools*. Boulder, CO: Westview Press; Hoerr, T.R. (2017, March). Connecting with students' parents. *Educational Leadership*, 74(6), pp. 88-89; National Education Association (2008). *Parent, family, community involvement in education*. Retrieved from: http://www.nea.org/assets/docs/PB11_ParentInvolvement08.pdf

7.0 References

Arbinger Institute (2016). *The outward mindset: Seeing beyond ourselves*. Oakland, CA: Berrett-Koehler.

Barton, P.E. (2003). *Parsing the achievement gap*. Princeton, NJ: Educational Testing Service.

Bartz, D.E., Collins-Ayanlaja, C., & Rice, P. (2017). African-American parents and effective parent involvement programs. *Schooling*, 8(1), 1-9.

Bartz, D.E. & Karnes, C. (2018). Effective parent involvement/family engagement programs. *National Forum Teacher Education Journal*, 28(3), 1-14.

Bartz, D.E., Karnes, C., & Rice, P. (2018). Enhancing children's school success through parent involvement/family engagement programs. *Journal of Education and Social Policy*, 5(1), 1-7.

Bartz, D.E., Rice, P., & Karnes, C. (2018). Community engagement: A key ingredient for public schools gaining stakeholders' input and support. *National Forum of Educational Administration and Supervision Journal*, 36(4), 1-7.

Epstein, J.L. (2011). *School, family, and community partnerships: Preparing educators and improving schools*. Boulder, CO: Westview Press.

Grant, K.B. & Ray, J.A. (2013). *Home, school, and community collaboration: Culturally responsive family engagement.* Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Hoerr, T.R. (2017, March). Connecting with students' parents. *Educational Leadership*, 74(6), pp. 88-89.

Kowalski, T.J. (2011). *Public relations in schools*. Boston: Pearson.

Lawson, M. (2003). School-family relations in context: Parent and teacher perceptions of parent involvement. *Urban Education, 38*(1), 77-133.

National Education Association (2008). Parent, family, community involvement in education. Retrieved from http://www.nea.org/assets/docs/PB11_ParentInvolvement08.pdf

Rockwell, R.E., Andre, L.C., & Hawley, M.K. (2010). *Families and educators as partners, 2nd edition*. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth.

Williams, T.T. & Sanchez, B. (2012). Parent involvement (and uninvolvement) at an inner-city high school. *Urban Education, 47*(3), 625-652.

Yale School of Medicine. (2010, July 27). *Comer school development program*. Retrieved from http://medicine.yale.edu/childstudy/comer/index.aspx