Parent Involvement Strategies
PSEA Promising Practices to Close Student Achievement Gaps

Parents and caregivers significantly impact students’ learning (in this Advisory, the term “parent” refers to any primary caregiver), regardless of socioeconomic status, ethnic or racial background, or parents’ education level. As a matter of fact, the most accurate predictor of student academic achievement is the degree to which families encourage learning; communicate high, achievable expectations to children; and become involved in their children’s education. Parent involvement also contributes to better school attendance, higher rates of homework completion, lower rates of student violence and substance abuse, fewer placements in special education, higher graduation rates, and higher rates of enrollment in higher education. For schools, high levels of parent involvement correlate with higher teacher morale, higher student achievement, and better academic reputations.

But significant barriers exist to meaningful parent involvement in schools. For example, one survey found that over 80 percent of parents do not feel like they have time to become involved in their child’s school. One-third of parents believe they have nothing to contribute to their child’s education, and one-third report they do not know how to become involved. About one-fourth of parents feel intimidated about becoming involved in their child’s school. Low income parents and parents of color are some of the least likely parents to be involved in their child’s education and some of the most likely parents to report barriers to involvement. Furthermore, parent involvement precipitously declines after early elementary school, leaving many middle and high schools bereft of involved parents.

The good news is that parents respond to encouragement from teachers. One study suggests that the best predictor of parent involvement is what the school does to promote it. The attitudes and actions of the school are more important than a family’s income, educational level, race, or previous experience volunteering in a school in predicting whether a parent becomes involved.

Parent Involvement Standards
The National PTA has adopted a framework for family involvement developed by the Center for School, Family, and Community Partnerships and endorsed by the NEA. The framework defines six standards for family involvement.

1. Parent Communication. Communication between parents and teachers should be two-way, frequent, and meaningful. Communication should also invite parents to share ideas, help form school goals and clarify institutional expectations. When communication is frequent and high-quality, parents’ evaluation of their child’s teacher, level of comfort with their child’s school, and involvement in school-based activities are all substantially higher.

2. Support for Parenting. Decisions parents make about diet, entertainment, healthcare, and discipline correlate with different outcomes in terms of student learning. Many schools provide parent education and support programs to help parents build more effective, developmentally appropriate parenting skills.

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3. Engaging Parents in Student Learning. When parents help teach their child, the parents not only improve the child’s skills, but they also increase their own feelings of competence, which, in turn, motivates students to perform better still. When teachers send home strategies and suggestions of ways parents could support learning, parents often respond favorably. In general, the more schools engage parents in specific student learning tasks, the more likely student achievement is to improve. This includes parent involvement in homework tasks as well as helping students adopt regular study and homework routines.

4. Involving Parents in Volunteering. Engaging parents and caregivers in school-based volunteer opportunities is usually one of the first ways that parents and school personnel envision “parent involvement.” In reality, parent volunteering is one kind of parent involvement that demonstrates little impact on student learning, but volunteering can be an important way to build linkages between parents and schools that lead to more family engagement overall.

5. Involving Parents in Making Decisions. Like volunteering, parent and caregiver involvement in school decision-making impacts student achievement largely because it builds relationships between caregivers and schools that encourage adults to become involved in student learning. For example, when student achievement in districts that involved parents in decision-making to adopt a new reading program is compared to student achievement in districts that did not involve parents, the districts that involved parents and caregivers in decisions about implementing the program and strategies for reinforcing the program at home had significantly higher reading scores.

6. Linkages with the Wider Community. Effective programs to involve parents in schools recognize the importance of engaging employers, religious, and community organizations in schools. These organizations not only have natural links with parents, but they have a vested interest in the success of children and youth in the local community.

Issues to Consider

Time. High quality parent involvement programs take time to design and implement, but it is rare that specific time is set aside for teachers to focus on parent involvement. Teachers advocating for more and better parent involvement programs should not be shy in advocating for specific time during the school day to implement these programs well. Effective parent involvement programs are those that contribute to effective instruction, not compete for time with it.

Funding. Effective parent involvement programs do not need to cost a lot of money. But the funds required for parent involvement programming should be clearly set aside. When parent involvement programs have to compete for scraps of money with other competing priorities, programs usually suffer.

Overcoming Barriers. Parents report many barriers to becoming involved, such as time, confidence, language barriers, and fear of school. Learning what barriers exist in your school could be an important step to increasing parent involvement.

For more information, including ideas on specific activities to increase parent involvement, consider accessing PSEA’s publication, Best Practices to Improve Parent Involvement, or contact Carla Claycomb, Ph.D., in PSEA’s Education Services Division, cclaycomb@psea.org. PSEA also has several brochures for parents: The Early Years in School: How Parents Can Help; Reading Aloud to Your Child—a Gift that Lasts a Lifetime; Helping your Teenager to Study More Productively; Homework: It Can Help; Help Your Child Take Tests; Discipline: An Important Way to Show a Child Love; Discipline for Teenagers; and TV Viewing: Setting the Rules.

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