

Student Learning Improves When Families Get Involved

by Joan Richardson

from the National Staff Development Council's Tools for Schools

When the school improvement team at Curtis Bay Elementary School in Baltimore decided the school needed to focus more attention on family involvement, the first challenge was educating parents and teachers about what that meant.

"Our teachers and parents thought the only way for parents to be involved was to volunteer in the classroom. We had to teach them and we continue to teach them that parent involvement can mean helping a student with a homework project, helping us put together a partnership, reading the school newsletter. Not every parent is going to be involved in the same way," said Jackie Griswold, the teacher who has chaired the School-Family-Community Action Team for seven years.

Involving every family in a child's education is an important piece of improving that child's learning, according to research by Joyce Epstein, director of the Center for School, Family, and Community Partnerships at Johns Hopkins University <<http://www.partnershipschoools.org>> in Baltimore. Research has demonstrated that parents are more likely to talk to children about school, monitor their schoolwork, and help their children learn when parents receive information from teachers about classroom learning activities, their child's strength and progress, and how to help children learn.

Through her research, Epstein has identified six types of family involvement in schools: parenting, communicating, volunteering, learning at home, decision making, and collaborating with the community.

Epstein said many schools do quite well in one-way communication from school to families. The area where they tend to do the least well, she said, is in teaching parents how they can effectively help their children with their school work.

"Parents are ready for this. Its teachers we have to convince," Epstein said.

Putting family involvement into place generally works best when done in conjunction with an existing school improvement team, Epstein said. But, that's not essential. "Sometimes, seeing how well this works will convince a school of the need for a real school improvement plan. It actually can lead to more effective school improvement planning," she said.

Epstein outlines five steps in her improvement process.

- 1) Create a School-Family-Community Partnership Action Team. This team guides the development of a comprehensive plan that integrates Epstein's six types of involvement.

The team assesses current practices, implements and coordinates selected activities, and evaluates the results.

The most crucial part of the action team approach, Epstein said, is the team's membership. Epstein recommends seven to 12 members, including at least three teachers from different grade levels, one administrator, and three parents with different age children.

In addition, Epstein said the action team needs to pay particular attention to who chairs the team. Although the first response is often to have a parent leader, Epstein said a teacher or counselor typically is more successful. "This person has to be able to get the work out of teachers that is needed to improve communication between school and home and will enhance the learning-at-home efforts," she said.

- 2) Obtain a budget of about \$1,000 to pay for time and materials. Some schools use Title I funds for this; many schools also have separate fund-raising to support this.
- 3) Identify the school's strengths and expectations for family involvement. Epstein recommends having structured discussions among various interest groups and using a checklist to identify current practices and uncover areas of need. (Epstein's new book, *School- Family-Community Partnerships: Your Handbook for Action* contains a lengthy checklist that schools can use to evaluate their current situation.
- 4) Develop a vision of what the school's family involvement efforts will be in three years and devise a plan to achieve that vision.

Griswold recommends that schools be realistic about how much they can accomplish in a single year. "Try to identify just one activity addressing each area of involvement," she said. Match your activities to the importance of each goal. If, for example, your goal is to improve volunteering, don't load up on strategies to improve two-way communication.

- 5) Evaluate the progress of the previous year, celebrate the successes, and plan for the next school year.

"We add a little bit each year but we try not to stretch ourselves too thin," Griswold said.

Teachers at Curtis Bay also do a monthly evaluation of family involvement, using a regular checklist to determine how the school has connected with each family that month. This checklist is also a regular way to remind teachers of the many ways that families and schools can be involved with each other. For example, if a family helps a child with a homework project or returns a coupon that appears in the school's monthly newsletter, those are included in family involvement.

Epstein believes that "just about all teachers and administrators want to involve families more. They just don't know the best ways to do that and sometimes, they are very wary because of past experiences."

The key to winning over reluctant educators, she believes, is showing them how their family involvement efforts will pay off for their students.

"If they really see that this is linked to improving student learning, then they're willing to participate," she said.

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