

Keeping Family-School-Community Connections Helps Support Secondary Students' Success

Research shows that parent involvement begins to decline at the onset of the pre-teen and adolescent years. It is extremely important for parents to be engaged in their children's education and to support student learning throughout the grades. Increasing parent involvement in middle and high schools can lead to higher student achievement, higher graduation rates, and more students admitted to colleges. Collaboration between parents, educators, students, and the community is the best way to ensure students meet the demands for higher education and the 21st century workforce.

—NEA President Dennis Van Roekel

Ask teachers what factors beyond the walls of their classrooms have a positive impact on student learning, and they consistently put parent and community involvement on the list.

The good news is that parents of elementary school students do seem to be engaged in their children's education. A recent survey from the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) found that 90 percent of the parents of elementary students said they had attended a parent-teacher conference—and that 60 percent volunteered or served on a school committee. But those numbers do not hold up once you move past the elementary years. At the middle school level, 76 percent of parents reported attending a parent-teacher conference, while 38 percent volunteered or served on a school committee; at the high school level, the study found that only six in 10 had attended a parent-teacher conference, and only a third (34 percent) had volunteered or served on a school committee.¹



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This trend of parents becoming less engaged in school activities during the middle and high school years needs to be addressed because the family's role in monitoring, motivating, and modeling positive behaviors is critical as students move into adolescence. Research unequivocally affirms the fact that parent, family, and community involvement in education has a positive and long-lasting effect on student learning in both middle school and high school, debunking the myth that parental involvement is either unnecessary or unwanted.²

Engaging families at the secondary level

Research shows the value of keeping parents engaged as their children move up the grades. An important study in 2008 found that student achievement of tenth graders

increased when parents were engaged in these specific ways: discussed activities or events of interest to the student as well as topics the student studied in class; reviewed course selection with the student; attended a school meeting and volunteered at the child's school. The authors of the study equated this level of parent involvement with the district spending an additional \$1,000 per pupil.³

Dr. Joyce Epstein, a distinguished researcher who directs the National Network of Partnership Schools at Johns Hopkins University, has been studying the effects of parent, family, and community involvement on student outcomes for nearly three decades. Her framework of six types of parent involvement⁴ has set a firm base for policies and practices to support student academic success.

Other researchers confirm that engaged families and communities have a positive impact on students' academic achievement (in English and math in particular), school attendance and graduation rates, the number of credits earned, postsecondary education and career

It's never too late for involvement

Researchers exploring the impact of ongoing parental involvement in high school on math achievement test scores found, for example, that school, family, and community factors independently and significantly affect students' math achievement. The analyses indicated that students in neighborhoods with high concentrations of poverty had lower math achievement test results, but scores improved with ongoing parental involvement.⁵ With such encouraging results, Epstein concludes that "it is never too late to initiate programs of family and community involvement, as benefits accrue through grade 12."⁶

plans, and other indicators of success in school.⁷ Indeed, when middle and high school parents and families work together with schools, students complete more course credits, hold higher aspirations for themselves, are more motivated and prepared to learn, and have fewer behavioral problems.⁸ The evidence holds true for all students regardless of the parents' education, family income, or background.⁹

With the consensus among researchers and practitioners that parent involvement and community support have a positive impact on student learning, partnerships between schools and the community have become a common feature of high-performing schools. Research shows that the most effective policies and practices at the secondary school level focus on (1) providing clear information and resources so that parents can help their teenager at home, and (2) offering a variety of opportunities for parents to volunteer and participate in school or school district governance and decision making.

Effective partnerships are not stand-alone projects or add-on programs; they must be well integrated into the school's overall mission and goals. To be successful, especially at the middle school and high school level, partnerships must be linked to student academic improvement and integrated into overall school improvement efforts.

Two models have documented their success:

- The **TIPS** (Teachers Involve Parents in Schoolwork) program, developed by Epstein and teachers in Baltimore, Md., has successfully boosted student writing skills, grades, and test scores of 700 African American middle schoolers. In addition, parents have become more involved in their children's education, and students are more likely to finish their homework. The longer parents took part in TIPS, the more students' writing scores improved.¹⁰ Sixth- and eighth-grade teachers, who sent weekly assignments home with information about how students could engage their families in science, found not only that students' grades in science improved, but also that there was a higher level of family involvement in science than by students in non-TIPS classes.¹¹
- Since 1987, more than 375,000 immigrant parents in California have increased their knowledge and skills to support their children's academic achievement and enrollment in higher education by participating in the **Parent Institute for Quality Education** (PIQE) program. Since then, PIQE programs have expanded to other cities in Arizona, Texas, and Minnesota. A recent study documented that children of Hispanic parents who completed the San Diego PIQE program achieved a 93 percent high school

graduation rate and 79.2 percent student enrollment in college or university.¹²

NEA affiliates create partnerships to engage families and communities

The **Parent-Teacher Home Visit Project** (PTHVP), a partnership formed 10 years ago between the Sacramento City Teachers Association, a faith-based community organizing group, and the school district, organizes teams of educators and parents to visit students and their families at home, build trusting relationships, and share instructional tools. Starting in 2006, teams in Sacramento provided information about new exit-exam graduation requirements and resources to assist students. Today, more students are passing. As a result of PTHVP visits to homes of students transitioning to high school, more parents are participating in school events. Outside of California, home visits have also become a successful and institutionalized part of school reform efforts in Ohio, Massachusetts, Montana, and Colorado.¹³

Adding an extra period to the school day is no easy feat, but parents, faculty, and members of the Community Council in Layton, Utah, collaborated in 2007 to do just that. The **Sophomore Advisory and Tutorial Period**, a new guidance program, was originally planned to help sophomores who were having a hard time adjusting academically and behaviorally at Northridge High School. Soon, however, planners realized that all 1,900 students could benefit. School staff and administrators found that the extra period had a significant impact: students completed more homework on time, one-on-one tutorials boosted grades and test scores, and student-teacher relationships were strengthened.

Vocabulary building became a school and community project in Idaho Falls, Idaho. Teachers and administrators at Skyline High School created a **Word of the Week Program** to help students prepare for the SAT, and then invited local businesses to get involved. Students were encouraged to use the words at school, and business people reinforced the learning by offering discounts to students who used the word on the premises. Students, teachers, staff members, and community members all incorporated the new vocabulary words into their lexicon as they all learned and used the words together.

R U Smarter Than a Middle Schooler?, a game show modeled after a popular television program, brought parents and students together at Adams Friendship Middle School in Friendship, Wis. Teachers who were looking for new ways to encourage students to be more academically engaged in math, science, health, and social studies created a game show event to spark student interest. Parents and students used the teacher-

developed study packets to prepare for the challenge. Each time a student turned in a study sheet, his or her name was entered into the drawing to be an on-stage contestant eligible to win more than \$1,000 in cash and prizes donated by area business leaders and community members. Everyone felt like a winner. Students were excited to show off their knowledge and parents were proud to see how much their children had learned.¹⁴

States stepping up efforts

States are stepping up their efforts to boost parent engagement in secondary schools. At least five states—California, Connecticut, Florida, New York, and Ohio—mandate that all public schools engage in specific activities to involve all parents in their children’s education.¹⁵ States must develop, adopt, and implement written policies and procedures to link parent involvement to student achievement goals. And eight more states—Georgia, Illinois, Kentucky, Maryland, Massachusetts, South Carolina, Utah, and Wisconsin—recommend, support, and encourage parent engagement but do not mandate any specific actions. South Carolina, for example, directs the state superintendent to “promote parental involvement as a priority for all levels from preK–12, with particular emphasis at the middle and high school levels where parental involvement is currently least visible.”¹⁶

Many states promote parent and community involvement in developing school improvement strategies, school safety, and dropout prevention programs, as well as initiatives to address the needs of at-risk youth and English Language Learners. Even without mandates, many states develop policies or issue guidance to reinforce the intent and spirit of their laws.

Since passage of the Kentucky Education Reform Act (KERA) in 1997, that state has established some 800 family resource and youth services centers in or near all qualifying elementary and secondary schools. Parent-school-community partnerships are viewed as essential program components; more than 1,400 parents across the state have been trained to conduct school improvement projects. In 2007, the Education Commission’s Parent Advisory Council issued a set of state standards and recommendations for family and community involvement that focused on student achievement.

Georgia’s Family Connection Partnership, created in 1991, is the largest statewide network of community collaboratives in the nation. Almost all counties include efforts to support student success and strengthen families. Partners in the local collaboratives include educators, business leaders, locally elected officials, faith-based and civic organizations, public and private service providers, families, and others.¹⁷

Some state policies affirm the principles contained in federal law, such as Section 1118 (20 U.S.C. § 6318) of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA/NCLB), and use Title I funds to provide secondary parents/caregivers substantial and meaningful opportunities to participate in the education of their children. Like ESEA/NCLB, these state policies require that every Title I school have a written parent involvement policy, developed with and approved by parents.

The economic stimulus bill (American Recovery and Reinvestment Act, or ARRA) is dramatically increasing the level of funding for education, and may provide unprecedented opportunities for schools and school systems to engage parents, families, and communities in the education of elementary and secondary students through family or community programs, initiatives, or partnerships designed help improve schools and student learning.

What policymakers should consider

State and local policymakers should advocate for laws, policies, and regulations that promote successful family-school-community partnerships that are research-based, well organized, adequately funded, and sustainable. In particular, we need to encourage parents, families, and communities to become more engaged in the education of middle and high school students.

NEA recommends that states:

- Develop and implement formal policies on parent and community involvement for all secondary schools. They should be research-based and coordinate with federally funded Parent Information and Resource Centers and other state agencies that focus on youth and young adults. States should allocate Title I funds and other state resources to assure sustainability.
- Include provisions that ensure families have timely access to information and employ communications strategies that effectively address various family structures, languages, and cultures. States should fund school-based parent information centers and hire school-community coordinators who are knowledgeable about the community’s historic, ethnic, linguistic, and cultural background.
- Collaborate with employers to develop parent- and family-friendly policies so that parents/caregivers can participate in school or education-related activities. States should encourage districts to develop reasonable background check requirements for adults.
- Waive fees or reduce the cost of background checks—and expedite requests.

- Allocate funds for professional development for all school personnel that make parent, family, and community engagement an integral component of student achievement and school improvement goals.
- Support collaborative efforts between state departments of education, local school systems, and higher education institutions so that the issue of parent, family, and community involvement in education is addressed in all teacher and administrator preparation programs.
- Require regular data gathering, evaluation, and reporting on the effectiveness of family involvement programs and activities.

NEA believes that much more needs to be done to actively engage parents, families, and community stakeholders in the academic life of middle and high school students. The drop in parent, family, and community involvement in education that occurs when students reach pre-teen and teen years can and must be reversed. To do so, many more research-based strategies, innovative practices, and effective policies must be implemented and sustained.

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Resources

Taking A Closer Look: A Guide to Online Resources on Family Involvement. Family Involvement Network of Educators (FINE), Harvard Family Research Project, 2005. www.finenetwork.org

Communities in Schools has connected community resources with schools to help students succeed in school and in life. During its 30-year history, the organization has coordinated the delivery of resources into schools in a way that is responsive, cost-efficient, and results-oriented. www.cisnet.org

Parent Involvement Schools of Excellence Certification Program. The National PTA, in partnership with national school principals' associations, recognizes, through a nationally accredited method, parent and family involvement in education and showcases schools that are implementing outstanding parent-community-school partnerships. www.pta.org

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¹⁷Kentucky Education Reform Act. Telephone conversation with Kentucky Department of Education staff on November 19, 2008. Georgia Family Connection Partnership. Telephone conversation with staff on November 20, 2008.