Partnering With Parents and Communities
Are Preservice Teachers Adequately Prepared?

Carolyn B. Flanigan, Ph.D., Academic Development Institute/Illinois Professional Learner's Partnership

May 2005

For more information on the topic of this paper email Carolyn Flanigan at cbflanigan@aol.com
**Research Background**

School, parent, and community partnerships have become an educational priority at both the state and federal levels. If teacher education programs are to meet the goals of the Illinois Professional Standards (Illinois State Board of Education, 1999), the objectives of the federal Goals 2000 (United States Department of Education, 1994), and the accreditation standards of the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE, 2002), the topic of school, parent, and community partnerships must be incorporated into the required curriculum. But even with these federal, state, and accreditation directives, little attention is afforded the topic in most teacher education programs (de Acosta, 1994; Epstein, 2001; Epstein, Sanders, & Clark, 1999; Greenwood & Hickman, 1991; Shartrand, Weiss, Kreider, & Lopez, 1997).

The Academic Development Institute (ADI) contracted with the Illinois Professional Learner’s Partnership (IPLP) to determine what colleges of education at the IPLP universities are doing to prepare preservice teachers to partner with parents and communities. IPLP is a partnership-based Teacher Quality Enhancement (TQE) project with the vision of changing the way universities prepare preservice teachers to teach in high-need Illinois K–12 schools. Five Illinois universities are partners in IPLP: Roosevelt University, Loyola University-Chicago, Illinois State University, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, and Northeastern Illinois University.

**Research Methods**

An email survey of 20 college of education (COE) faculty and the COE dean at each of the five IPLP universities was conducted in September 2000 in addition to website reviews of course catalog descriptions and syllabi. The survey asked two questions: What courses will you teach in academic year 2000–2001? and How do you prepare the preservice teachers in your classes to work with parents and communities? A second more detailed email survey was sent in April 2001 to 134 COE faculty. (See Appendix A to view the survey.)

To enhance the survey data, faculty who responded to the surveys and indicated an interest in the topic were organized at each IPLP university into focus groups to (a) discuss their attitudes about the topic, (b) exchange ideas for classroom activities and field experiences, (c) recommend improvements in this part of the teacher preparation program, and (d) identify their main concerns about the topic. An additional focus group of new teachers was organized through the ISU/Community Consolidated School District #21 (Wheeling, Illinois) Professional Development School (PDS) with the same objectives as the faculty groups.

**Research Findings**

**2000 Survey and Reviews of Course Descriptions and Syllabi**

When a course in parent and community involvement is offered it is usually part of Early Childhood Education or Special Education programs (Epstein et al., 1999; Shartrand et al., 1997). Website reviews of university course catalogs showed that three of the five IPLP universities offered a required parent and community involvement course as part of early childhood education or special education programs. Based on syllabi and survey responses all...
of the IPLP universities offered required courses—from three at one university to 15 at another—that included at least one class session on the topic.

Survey responses and some syllabi showed that preservice teachers are benefiting from hands-on experiences in field settings. The field experience usually takes place in student teaching or field experience courses. Early childhood education and elementary education programs at one university include several activities in student teaching and field experience courses: attending parent information nights, open houses, and individual conferences; planning a field trip; and developing a classroom newsletter for parents. Student teachers in the special education program at another university participate in a seminar in addition to student teaching with the goal of discussing their site experiences and other topics that are important to their development as teachers with interested and empathetic listeners. An elementary education course, offered at two universities on teaching social studies in the elementary schools, requires students to do a community service project.

### 2001 Survey

A more comprehensive email survey was sent to 134 COE faculty at the IPLP universities in April 2001. The importance of preparing preservice teachers to partner with parents and communities was confirmed by 89% of the respondents. Although 84% of the respondents taught one or more courses that included the topic, only 16% taught a course on the topic. Their assessments of the level of preparedness of COE graduates to work with parents and communities are illustrated in Table 1 and their preferences for incorporating the topic into the education curriculum are listed in Table 2.

| Table 1. Preparedness of COE Graduates to Work With Parents and Communities |
|-----------------------------|------------------------|
| 30%                         | Well prepared          |
| 51%                         | Somewhat prepared      |
| 11%                         | Unprepared             |

| Table 2. Preferences for Incorporating Topic in the Curriculum |
|-----------------------------|------------------------|
| 95%                         | Interspersed throughout the entire teacher education program |
| 35%                         | Required undergraduate course |
| 27%                         | Required graduate course |
| 27%                         | Offered as a separate course |
| 8%                          | Focused primarily on multicultural or special populations |
| 5%                          | Offered as an elective undergraduate course |
| 5%                          | Offered as an elective undergraduate course |

A majority of faculty (59%) devoted two to four class sessions to partnering with parents and communities. Table 3 lists topics covered in the courses.
Table 3. Course Topics Covered That Relate to Partnering With Parents and Communities

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Percentage</th>
<th>Topic</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>76%</td>
<td>Barriers to parental involvement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>70%</td>
<td>Benefits of parental involvement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>70%</td>
<td>Techniques for improving two-way communication between home and school</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>68%</td>
<td>How to work with parents from diverse cultures</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>65%</td>
<td>How to identify and use community resources</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>62%</td>
<td>Ways to involve parents in helping their children learn in and out of school</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>59%</td>
<td>How to organize and involve parents and other volunteers at school</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>54%</td>
<td>How to conduct a parent–teacher conference</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>51%</td>
<td>Readings about working with parents and communities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>51%</td>
<td>How schools can help meet social, educational, and social service needs of families</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>43%</td>
<td>How to work with communities that include diverse cultures</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>41%</td>
<td>How to design interactive homework for students to share with parents</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>38%</td>
<td>Research on school, parent, and community partnerships</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30%</td>
<td>How to design and produce a newsletter for parents</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>24%</td>
<td>How to plan and conduct a workshop for parents</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Course work in parent and community involvement should include experiences working directly with families and communities (Shartrand et al., 1997) but 46% of faculty responders did not offer their students hands-on experiences in the field. Field experiences that were offered by 54% of respondents included participation in parent conferences, parent interviews, home visits, site visits, and case studies.

**2002 Focus Groups**

In April 2002 focus groups were conducted with faculty at each of the IPLP campuses and new teachers at the PDS site. Several themes emerged from the discussions.

**Faculty Concerns**

**Judgmental Attitudes of Preservice Teachers**

Faculty find it challenging to broaden the cultural scope of preservice teachers who have often led isolated suburban lives with little exposure to other cultures. One faculty member noted, “Students come to our classes, at least in their senior year, being very judgmental.” Differences in economic status of preservice teachers and their students also have an impact on judgmental attitudes. The focus group members agreed that the best way to combat judgmental attitudes is to provide preservice teachers with experiences that involve people of different races and cultures.

**Negative Attitudes of Preservice Teachers About Parents**

Faculty are also concerned about parent blaming. One respondent said, “It takes a lot of talking and experiencing to get preservice teachers to stop blaming parents for whatever they see are difficulties with student learning. There’s a general bias . . . that says parents don’t care and if children don’t succeed it’s because their parents don’t care.” Preservice teachers may also have difficulty seeing situations from parent perspectives because most of them aren’t parents and are at college, away from their parents. Given this mindset, preservice teachers have difficulty transferring their need for independence from their parents to the need for involvement with the parents of their students.
Mixed Messages About Parent Involvement
Several participants commented that even though they promote the message of parental involvement in their classes they find that “it’s very difficult for our students to be given one message when they’re in our classes and receive a different message played out on a regular basis even in these so called successful schools.” As one faculty member said, the message they’re getting in schools is “it’s nice to have parents do bake sales and raise money but don’t mess around with the real stuff that we do.”

Restrictions of Teacher Education
Teacher education, according to one participant, still focuses on “standing up in front of a classroom delivering a lesson . . . and as long as it’s defined that way anything else will be seen as peripheral.” This approach to teacher education could explain the lack of attention to parents and communities, especially at the secondary level. One respondent said, “We do not have special course work that specifically deals with teachers and families and involves families and being part of communities. As a result our students do encounter problems in student teaching when they have to contact parents.” Classroom management, which can lead to conflicts with parents, is considered another weak teacher preparation area. Even though these faculty include parents and communities in their courses they’re limited by university regulations, especially in clinical experiences.

Suggestions for Improving Teacher Preparation
There was a consensus that NCATE standards are forcing colleges of education to review the curriculum and address the level of attention given to the topic of parents and communities. Some participants suggested replacing an existing course with a parent/community course. For example, one faculty member said, “We had talked at one point about maybe doing away with one of the reading courses in the graduate elementary ed program to make space for a parent course, since we have so many language arts reading courses.” Another elementary education program dropped speech as a general requirement to elevate family involvement. An alternative to offering a course is providing workshops or seminars.

New Teacher Perspectives
In contrast to the faculty concerns about the negative attitudes and cultural biases of their preservice students toward parents, new teachers were comfortable communicating with
parents and encouraged by parental involvement. One teacher said, “I have a lot of different
leveled groups with spelling and math and things like that so I have parents in all of the
time and I find that most of the communication is a positive thing.” For most of them the
professional development school experience was their main source of parent and community
information and experiences. Another teacher said, “I think I had a class where it was
discussed briefly. . . . But it wasn’t touched on in any other class. . . . I think it should’ve
been.”

However, teachers were concerned about the quality of the preparation of preservice teachers
for family involvement in the traditional student teaching program. One new teacher
commented, “Preservice teachers don’t see the beginning of the year when the teacher
introduces herself to the parents. That initial introduction is huge because it sets off the entire
year. Then, the open house, the conferences, the portfolio nights, the field trips, and how you
begin inviting parents into your room. . . . I’d be scared for a first year teacher not to know
how to handle those situations.”

These new teachers agreed with the faculty on the impact of negative attitudes of experienced
teachers about parent involvement. One teacher explained the discouraging climate other
teachers in her school were creating. She said, “Our principal is really for parent nights and
having all of these extra things, which I think are great . . . but we have some teachers who
say, ‘We have to do this again? He just keeps adding more. We don’t want to do it.’ . . . They
look at it as extra work. . . . So you keep hearing all of this negative talk.” How this new
teacher fairs in this climate will be interesting to follow.

**Conclusion**

By looking at teacher preparation for parent and community involvement from the
perspectives of COE faculty and new teachers through surveys and focus groups, this study
provides a complete picture of what IPLP universities are doing, and should be doing, to
prepare preservice teachers to partner with parents and communities. Gathering data through
a combination of surveys and focus groups gave participants the unique opportunity to
individually respond to both closed and open-ended survey questions as well as interact with
other faculty. Based on post-focus-group reactions, this research was immediately useful to
IPLP university faculty participants. The focus groups offered participants the experience of
meeting with others who share their interest in and commitment to the topic, provided a
forum to voice their opinions and concerns, and served as a spark for them to make changes
in their courses and departments.

This research is useful for a variety of different stake holders. The data were gathered directly
from faculty who teach preservice teachers and have a strong interest in the topic of
partnering with parents and communities. The participant faculty’s concerns, classroom and
clinical activities, and suggestions for improving teacher education can be used by other
college of education faculty to improve their courses, help them understand and counteract
the prejudices of preservice teachers, and give them insight into the difficulties other faculty
face. Teacher education programs can use the findings as a gauge to measure their programs
and meet federal, state, and accreditation standards. Faculty and administrators can use the
data to present a valid argument for change to those who are the facilitators of change. In
addition, the surveys and focus groups have the potential to serve as a trigger for collaboration and communication within COE departments, universities, and schools.

References


Appendix A

**Preparing Preservice Teachers to Work With Parents Communities: A Survey of IPLP Universities for the Illinois Professional Learners’ Partnership Project**

1. Do you teach a full semester course for preservice teachers on the topic of working with parents and communities?
   
   ___Yes  (Go to Q. 1a)
   
   ___No   (Skip to Q. 4)

1a. What is the title of the course you teach?______________________________
1b. This course is:
   ___ An elective  ___ Required  ___ An undergraduate course  ___ A graduate course

1c. In which department is this course offered?
   ___ Early childhood education
   ___ Elementary education
   ___ Special education
   ___ Secondary education
   ___ Education
   ___ Curriculum and instruction
   ___ Educational psychology
   ___ Other (specify)

1d. This course meets the requirements for which of the following degree programs?
   ___ Early childhood education
   ___ Elementary education
   ___ Special education
   ___ Middle school education
   ___ Secondary education
   ___ Other (specify)

2. Do you teach a second course for preservice teachers on the topic of working with parents and communities?
   ___ Yes (Go to Q. 2a)
   ___ No (Skip to Q. 4)

2a. What is the title of this course? ________________________________

2b. This course is:
   ___ An elective  ___ Required  ___ An undergraduate course  ___ A graduate course

2c. In which department is this course offered?
   ___ Early childhood education
   ___ Elementary education
   ___ Special education
   ___ Secondary education
   ___ Education
   ___ Curriculum and instruction
   ___ Educational psychology
   ___ Other (specify)

2d. This course meets the requirements for which of the following degree programs?
   ___ Early childhood education
   ___ Elementary education
   ___ Special education
   ___ Middle school education
   ___ Secondary education
   ___ Other (specify)
3. Do you teach more than two full semester courses for preservice teachers on the topic of working with parents and communities?
   ___Yes
   ___No

4. Do you include the topic of working with parents and communities as part of one or more of the courses you teach?
   ___Yes (Go to Q. 4a)
   ___No (Skip to Q. 7)

4a. What is the title of one course? ________________________________

4b. This course is:
   __An elective  __Required  __An undergraduate course  __A graduate course

4c. In which department is this course offered?
   ___Early childhood education
   ___Elementary education
   ___Special education
   ___Secondary education
   ___Education
   ___Curriculum and instruction
   ___Educational psychology
   ___Other (specify)

4d. This course meets the requirements for which of the following degree programs?
   ___Early childhood education
   ___Elementary education
   ___Special education
   ___Middle school education
   ___Secondary education
   ___Other (specify) ________________________________

5. Do you teach a second course for preservice teachers on the topic of working with parents and communities?
   ___Yes (Go to Q. 5a)
   ___No (Skip to Q. 7)

5a. What is the title of this course? ________________________________

5b. This course is:
   __An elective  __Required  __An undergraduate course  __A graduate course
5c. In which department is this course offered?
___Early childhood education
___Elementary education
___Special education
___Secondary education
___Education
___Curriculum and instruction
___Educational psychology
___Other (specify) _______________________________________

5d. This course meets the requirements for which of the following degree programs?
___Early childhood education
___Elementary education
___Special education
___Middle school education
___Secondary education
___Other (specify) _______________________________________

6. Do you teach more than two courses that include the topic of working with parents and communities?
___Yes
___No

7. How much class time do you take to cover the topic of working with parents and communities?
___No class time
___Two to four class sessions
___Part of one class session
___More than four class sessions
___One class session

8. Please check the topics listed below that you cover in the courses you teach:
___How to conduct a parent–teacher conference
___How to plan and conduct a workshop for parents
___How to design and produce a newsletter for parents
___How to organize and involve parents and other volunteers at school
___How to design interactive homework for students to share with parents
___How to identify and use community resources
___Research on school, parent, and community partnerships
___How to work with parents from diverse cultures
___How to work with communities that include diverse cultures
___Readings about working with parents and communities
___The benefits of parental involvement
___The barriers to parental involvement
___Techniques for improving two-way communication between home and school
___Ways to involve parents in helping their children learn in school and outside
___How schools can help meet social, educational, and social service needs of families
___I don’t cover any of these topics.
9. Do you offer your students opportunities to learn about working with parents and communities through hands-on experiences in the field?
   ___Yes  (Go to Q. 9a)
   ___No   (Skip to Q. 10)

9a. Please list examples of these activities.
   _____________________________________________________________
   _____________________________________________________________
   _____________________________________________________________
   _____________________________________________________________

10. The topic of teachers working with parents and communities should be (check all that apply):
    ___Offered as a separate course
    ___Interspersed throughout the entire teacher education program
    ___Offered as an elective undergraduate course
    ___Offered as an elective graduate course
    ___A required undergraduate course
    ___A required graduate course
    ___Focused primarily on multicultural or special populations

11. In your opinion, preparing preservice teachers to work with parents and communities is:
    ___Very important
    ___Somewhat important
    ___Not important

12. Most of the preservice students who graduate from your college of education would describe their readiness to work with parents and communities as:
    ___Unprepared
    ___Somewhat prepared
    ___Well prepared

13. What is your title?
    ___Professor
    ___Associate Professor
    ___Assistant Professor
    ___Lecturer
    ___Visiting Professor
    ___Visiting Lecturer
    ___Other (specify) _________________________________

14. How would you change what you do in your classes to better prepare preservice teachers to work with parents and communities? (Please feel free to continue your comments, questions, or examples on an extra page.)
   _____________________________________________________________
   _____________________________________________________________
   _____________________________________________________________
   _____________________________________________________________

Harvard Family Research Project • Harvard Graduate School of Education • 3 Garden Street • Cambridge, MA • 02138
Website: www.hfrp.org • Email: hfrp@gse.harvard.edu • Tel: 617-495-9108 • Fax: 617-495-8594
15. Please add your comments, concerns, or ideas on ways the college of education can improve the preparation of preservice teachers to conduct effective school–parent–community partnerships and communication. (*Please feel free to continue your comments, questions, or examples on an extra page.*)

________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________

THANK YOU VERY MUCH FOR YOUR COOPERATION