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# Partnering With Parents and Communities Are Preservice Teachers Adequately Prepared?

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May 2005

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## 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.

<b>Table 1. Preparedness of COE Graduates to Work With Parents and Communities</b>	
30%	Well prepared
51%	Somewhat prepared
11%	Unprepared

<b>Table 2. Preferences for Incorporating Topic in the Curriculum</b>	
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**

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

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

### **Practical Tips From Faculty**

Faculty shared some of their classroom and clinical activities involving parents.

“We talk about the role of the communicator collaborator. And I actually teach them communication skills.”

“We have a whole session set up of instruction to deal with when a parent comes in and about parent teacher conferences. We do a lot of role playing and preparation for that.”

“Preservice students are required to attend PTO/PTA meetings and all of the things that the teacher does outside the school so students can be exposed to the real world.”

“I strongly emphasize the idea of putting out a regular newsletter in the high school classroom that includes not just things about the school but things about the classroom.”

“I talk about working with parents from my own experience, how important it was to me and how I started doing it as soon as I got the list of kids in high school.”

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.

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## 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
- Part of one class session
- One class session
- Two to four class sessions
- More than four class sessions

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.

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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.*)

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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.)*

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THANK YOU VERY MUCH FOR YOUR COOPERATION