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Supporting the Principal's Data-Driven Decisions

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Just the Facts

- Family involvement in education tends to decrease across the middle level and high school, yet remains a powerful predictor of adolescents' academic achievement and other positive outcomes.
- Family involvement in secondary education is associated with higher rates of college enrollment (Zarrett & Eccles, 2006).
- The academic encouragement parents provide to their adolescents is even more powerful than the support provided by friends (Sands & Plunkett, 2005).
- Evaluation studies increasingly demonstrate that intervention programs can strengthen family involvement with positive results for youth school success.

Promoting Family Involvement

Parents and educators frequently end up like ships that pass in the night: overworked and time-deprived families and professionals can find it difficult to stop and exchange signals. This is true especially during the middle level and high school years, due in part to adolescents' increasing desire for independence and to changes in school structure and organization. As a result, family involvement in secondary school tends to decrease from earlier years. Yet a large body of research supports the importance of family involvement in the middle and high school years. Although the nature of family involvement processes changes from those of early childhood and elementary school, families remain a crucial influence in the lives and learning of older youth.

About the Authors

Suzanne M. Bouffard and **Naomi Stephen** adapted this article from the research brief *Family Involvement in Middle and High School Students' Education* by Holly Kreider, Margaret Caspe, Susan Kennedy, and Heather Weiss of the Harvard Family Research Project (HFRP). This brief is the most recent in a series of three entitled *Family Involvement Makes a Difference*, which reviews research on family involvement in early childhood, elementary school, and middle and high school and is available at www.hfrp.org.

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Emerging research shows that principals and superintendents play an essential role in building family involvement. Principals can create a school climate that supports family involvement by communicating with teachers about the importance of families, providing professional development, and ensuring accountability. In addition, principals' and superintendents' outreach to families sends the message that families are welcome and increases family involvement (Simon, 2004; Van Voorhis & Sheldon, 2004). There are many ways that secondary school principals can help engage families in the education of adolescents.

Research links family involvement in middle and high school to students' positive academic and social outcomes. This article focuses on three categories of effective family involvement processes that we identified through a comprehensive review of the literature: home-school relationships, responsibility for learning, and supportive

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parenting. (Although family involvement can include other processes, such as parent leadership, community organizing, and participation in school decision-making, these are not included because there is little quantitative research linking these specific activities to youth outcomes.)

These categories remain consistent from birth through adolescence, but specific best practices vary within the categories as children get older. Family involvement matters for students from all backgrounds, and regardless of race, ethnicity, or income level, families want to be involved and find creative ways to partner with schools. Research does reveal, however, that some family involvement processes and their associated benefits vary across demographic groups, and educators should be sensitive to the cultural and contextual factors unique to their school communities.

Meeting the Developmental Needs of Adolescents

To be successful in school and in life, adolescents need trusting and caring relationships with supportive adults. They also need opportunities to form their own identities, express themselves, and engage in experiences that develop competence and self-esteem (Roeser, Eccles, & Sameroff, 2000). Although adolescents desire independence and time with peers, they continue to rely on guidance from parents and other adults (Zarrett & Eccles, 2006).

As a result, family involvement processes must be respectful of adolescents' drive for independence, expanding cognitive abilities, and widening social networks. When there is a match among adolescent developmental needs, parents' attitudes and practices, and schools' expectations and support of family involvement, the results can be more positive (Casper, Lopez, & Wolos, 2007). Principals can facilitate such a match by creating a welcoming environment for families and by positioning school personnel as the first point of contact for parents' questions about educational practices at home and in school as well as plans for the future.

Home-School Relationships

Home-school relationships—the formal and informal connections between the family and school—are just as important for adolescents as they are for younger children. Such relationships provide parents with information they need to support their children's learning and success, convey parents' beliefs about the importance of education to teachers and students, and lay the foundation for all other forms of involvement (Cooper, Jackson, Nye, & Lindsay, 2001). In addition, when families of diverse backgrounds are involved at the school level, teachers become more aware of cultural and community issues and, in turn, become more likely to engage and reach out to parents in meaningful and effective ways (Domina, 2005; Marschall, 2006).

Home-school relationships include face-to-face interactions at school (e.g. parent-teacher conferences), phone calls, notes, and e-mail. The specific format

is less important than the quality of the interaction. Home-school relationships should feature communication that is ongoing and two-way—initiated by families and educators. Moreover, educators and families must share responsibility for students' learning.

Positive home-school relationships are associated with multiple benefits for adolescents. Most important, they help parents monitor their teenagers' academic and social progress and acquire information they need to help their children make decisions about their academic futures (Hill & Taylor, 2004). For example, parent participation in school- or community-sponsored college-outreach programs supports adolescent learning and development by influencing students' post-graduation plans. This is particularly true for low-income, minority, and immigrant youth. Parents who attend meetings at the school and obtain basic information about college entrance processes, SAT preparation, financial aid, and course placement begin to imagine their children as college students, feel more comfortable in the school environment, and build support groups with other parents to scaffold their children's college preparation (Auerbach, 2004; Gándara & Moreno, 2002).

Responsibility for Learning

Responsibility for learning refers to family involvement practices that may be less visible to educators but emphasize homework management, educational expectations, and encouragement for college.

Homework management. Parents are less likely to be directly involved in the homework of middle level and high school students as compared to younger children. Nonetheless, parental encouragement and help in managing homework (e.g., setting aside a dedicated space) helps adolescents complete homework more accurately and develop self-regulation and self-monitoring skills. Such help can also decrease parent-child conflict over homework and raise grades (Zhan, 2006). The benefits of parental management of homework holds true for low-income, urban minority, and rural White youth (Xu, 2004; Xu & Corno, 2003).

Educational expectations. High parental expectations for students' success and achievement stand out as a significant influence on many academic outcomes in high school, including math and reading scores, credits completed, and achievement growth (Catsambis, 2001; Jeynes, 2003; Trusty, Maximo, & Salazar, 2003; Zhan, 2006). When adolescents perceive that their parents have high educational goals for them, they have more interest in school, greater academic self-regulation, and higher motivation and goal pursuits (Gonzalez-DeHass, Willems, & Doan Holbein, 2005; Marchant, Paulson, & Rothlisberg, 2001). The more families discuss school issues, the greater impact their expectations can have on adolescent academic achievement (Jeynes, 2005).

High expectations may be most important for the most at-risk students. For example, high expectations appear to shield low-income Latino youth from the risks associated with attending low-performing urban schools (Ceballo, 2004). Such academic encouragement by Latino parents is associated directly with youth staying in school and indirectly with higher GPAs through higher rates of homework completion (Martinez, DeGarmo, & Eddy, 2004). The effect of academic expectations might vary by gender, however. Mothers' and teachers' academic support was positively related to adolescent Latina girls' academic motivation, while fathers' and teachers' academic support was positively related to adolescent Latino boys' academic motivation (Alfaro, Umana-Taylor, & Hamaca, 2006).

Encouragement for college. Parents' constant encouragement and discussions about school and higher education promote students' college aspirations and preparation and are associated with a greater likelihood of enrolling in college (although the degree of benefit differs by ethnic and racial group as well as by immigration generational status) (Catsambis, 2001; McCarron

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& Inkelas, 2006; Perna & Titus, 2005; Trusty, 1999). When parents encourage college enrollment and adolescents perceive parents' interest in their school success, youth sign up for college-preparatory classes, participate in out-of-school time programs that may prepare them for college, and develop aspirations to attend college (Swail, Cabrera & Lee, 2004). For example, one study found that high-achieving low-income Latino college students reported that their parents provided them with encouragement and motivation, conveying the idea that valuing education was a "way out" of poverty (Ceballos, 2004).

Positive home-school relationships and two-way communication lay the foundation for all other kinds of involvement.

Supportive Parenting

Supportive parenting—which includes parents' attitudes, values, and child-rearing practices—is another family-involvement process that has an important influence on learning. The styles

that parents use to engage youth, the quality of parent-youth relationships, and the ways parents monitor youth behavior influence adolescent achievement. Although these processes are less likely to be directly influenced by principals, it is important for all educators to understand how they influence learning and academic success.

Parent-Youth Relationships

Adolescents do better in school when their parents are emotionally warm and responsive to their needs (Steinberg, Lamborn, Dornbusch, & Darling, 1992; Simpson, 2001; Moore, Guzman, Hair, Lippman, & Garrett, 2004). Similarly, adolescents who share trusting relationships with their parents—characterized by mutual and sustained bonds and open communication—have higher GPAs and are more likely to stay out of trouble (Soenens, Vansteenkiste, Luyckx, &

Goossens, 2006). Furthermore, adolescents benefit when these supportive and mature relationships with parents begin in the middle school years (Tenenbaum, Porche, Snow, Tabors, & Ross, 2007).

Parenting Styles

Parenting styles—including how parents use discipline and control—are also associated with adjustment and achievement. Many studies suggest that an authoritative style, which is responsive, warm, and firm but democratic, is associated with more positive outcomes than other styles. However, recent research shows that parenting styles and their effects differ among ethnic and demographic groups due to cultural traditions and norms and contextual factors (Mandara, 2006). For example, strict limit-setting may be more adaptive for families who live in high-crime neighborhoods or for those who face racial discrimination.

Monitoring

Monitoring represents a parent's—or another close adult's—efforts to know what is going on in an adolescent's life. Monitoring of social activities decreases school problems, substance use and delinquency, and promotes social competence and good grades (Rodriguez, 2002). By monitoring adolescents' academic and social lives, parents can catch emerging problems and promote positive academic outcomes (Catsambis, 2001; Sartor & Youniss, 2002).

Putting It Into Practice

Clearly, several family involvement processes are crucial for middle level and high school students' achievement, social development, and likelihood of attending college. What can principals and others do to promote family involvement and its associated benefits? The following strategies can help create systematic and sustained approaches to family involvement that honor the developmental needs of adolescents and their families.

- Create opportunities to build home-school relationships. Positive home-school relationships and two-way

communication lay the foundation for all other kinds of involvement. Principals can facilitate these relationships by encouraging and expecting teachers to communicate with families and by providing opportunities for parents to attend school events, attend parent–teacher conferences, and participate in decision-making and leadership groups. Principals can also create a school environment that is welcoming for families.

- Provide professional development for teachers and other staff members. To support staff members' efforts to develop relationships with families, principals can partner with professionals in their district and beyond to provide professional development opportunities. Family involvement can also be incorporated into other professional development opportunities—for example, incorporating family literacy activities into a workshop for reading teachers.
- Give parents the information they need to support their children's academic trajectories. When parents have information on school and state educational policies and regulations, and understand how these relate to their children's academic progress, they can help their adolescents succeed. For example, middle level and high schools can inform parents about graduation requirements and courses that are needed for acceptance to college.
- Help parents monitor their adolescents' growth and progress. Schools can make it easier for parents to know what is going on in their adolescents' lives by communicating information about individual performance and school events on a regular basis. Parents can then draw on this information to ask their children meaningful and relevant questions.
- Invest in programs and practices that engage families in college preparation. Principals can position their schools as the first place where parents can access information about postsecondary education. Informational meetings for parents and students and “college application evenings” and “financial aid nights” can help reduce anxiety and provide much-needed group support.
- Be sensitive to the cultural values of adolescents and

their families. Some family involvement processes are more appropriate or beneficial for youth from particular ethnic and cultural groups. It is important for principals to be aware of their school populations' needs and strengths (see Resources for examples of programs that consider the unique challenges and strengths of Latino families).

- Look for relationships in unexpected places. Families are involved not just in schools and homes but in a variety of settings. Out-of-school time programs, faith-based institutions, and community-based organizations can provide opportunities and entry points for families to support learning. As a result, a parent's work schedule need not be a barrier to involvement. In fact, a work environment can support families by providing flexible time so parents can attend school functions and by encouraging parents to use office equipment (such as a computer) to support school assignments during nonwork hours. By forging relationships with local businesses, community organizations, and other partners, principals can help make these strategies a reality.

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Summing Up: Families Matter

The research is clear: schools and families matter for adolescents' learning and academic success. Secondary school principals, families, and communities can and do work together to reap the benefits of strong and developmentally appropriate family involvement. As we have illustrated, these partnerships are particularly important for facilitating transitions from the middle level to high school and from high school to college and other postsecondary experiences. By continually building and supporting family involvement throughout the middle level and high school years, principals

can better ensure that students enter their schools ready to learn and exit ready to enter college, the workforce, and their professional and civic lives. **PRR**

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Resources

The Harvard Family Research Project (HFRP) believes that family involvement, in all its diverse forms, must be part of a comprehensive system that supports learning by integrating school and nonschool opportunities. This framework, which HFRP calls complementary learning, is based on two principles. First, children need access to many learning opportunities, including schools, supportive families, early-childhood programs, out-of-school time programs and activities, health and social services, and community-based resources. Second, children benefit more when these opportunities are intentionally connected to one another, complementing one another, and working toward consistent outcomes. For more information about complementary learning and HFRP's other projects, visit www.hfrp.org.

The Family Involvement Network of Educators (FINE) is a national network of more than 8,000 members interested in promoting strong partnerships among children's educators, their families, and their communities. There is no cost to join, and members receive regular e-mail announcements of new resources and current ideas in family involvement. For more information, visit www.gse.harvard.edu/hfrp/projects/fine/joinfine.html

Teachers Involve Parents in Schoolwork (TIPS) is an interactive homework process developed by the National Network of Partnership Schools at Johns Hopkins University. As part of their homework, students are required to share their work and express their ideas at home. Parents are invited to pose questions and comments and give teachers feedback on the assignment. TIPS has helped students in grades 6–8 complete their homework more accurately and get better grades (Van Voorhis, 2003). Students attribute better grades to support they receive from their families, increased interest in the subject through family involvement, and an improved ability to talk through science concepts. For more information, visit www.csos.jhu.edu/p2000/tips/TIPSmain.htm

Parent Institute for Quality Education (PIQE) provides information to low-income parents about how to navigate the school system and seek educational opportunities for their children. PIQE includes a nine-week training course that empowers parents to promote academic progress and social development in their children. PIQE has reduced high school drop-out rates and increased college participation for Latino youth in California. Nearly 80% of the Latino youth whose parents participated in PIQE enrolled in college, surpassing the national average of 62% college enrollment in the general population. For more information, visit www.piqe.org

The **Puente Project** was designed to increase the number of low-income Latino youth who attend college, complete their degrees, and return to their communities to serve as mentors and role models. Programs at high schools and community colleges throughout California educate parents about schooling and postsecondary planning. Students in the Puente Project enter college, graduate from college, and transfer to four-year colleges from community colleges at greater rates than their peers. For more information, visit www.puente.net

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