

Leadership Module for Family-School Partnerships: Creating Essential Connections for Children's Reading and Learning

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Purpose

This module is designed to provide the leadership team with essential information about critical process variables for creating and sustaining family-school connections (i.e., approach taken, attitudes held, atmosphere present, actions taken). The content focuses on family-school partnerships and emphasizes school variables that impact parent participation. Broad topics, which include policies for family-school partnerships to enhance children's learning, critical aspects of a welcoming atmosphere at school for engaging families, ensuring a school-wide effort for partnerships, and persistent efforts to reach uninvolved families, are important for children's learning and applicable specifically to enhancing children's reading skills. Although teachers are the primary contact with parents, ways to support teacher efforts to enhance reading of students living in unique situations are also important.

Goals

- To articulate a mission statement that promotes the importance and expectation of family-school partnerships for children's learning.
- To create multiple options for parent participation in reading and learning by considering the National Standards for Parent/ Family Involvement Programs (National PTA) and Epstein's six partnership types.
- To develop a realistic planning process (i.e., three year outline and one year action plan based on Epstein's research).
- To create a welcoming, respectful, and inclusive climate for participation.
- To consider the benefits of a family-school team (planning and a mechanism to listen to and respond to concerns across home and school).
- To create a sense of shared responsibility for educational outcomes (sharing information on the significance of the role played by home and school for children's learning).
- To foster constructive attitudes for working with families (e.g., benefits of multiple perspectives, focusing on strengths, non-blaming, problem solving interactions).
- To persist in use of strategies for reaching uninvolved families (e.g., information on school policies and practices, personal contact, trust building, understanding parental needs/concerns).

Outline of Course Content

- Summer 2002 Session – Overview of essential information about critical process variables for creating and sustaining family-school connections (i.e., approach taken, attitudes held, atmosphere present, actions taken). Participants to read the module.

- Study Groups in September 2002 – May 2003 – Fourteen study group activities are offered in this module so that participants may choose 5 activities that best meet their needs for developing family-school connections for children’s learning. This module is designed to provide the leadership team with essential information about critical process variables for creating and sustaining family-school connections (i.e., approach taken, attitudes held, atmosphere present, actions taken). The following recommendations with respect to selection of activities are made to ensure the participants benefit fully from the content of the module:
 - Complete Study Group Activity #1 because it serves as an advanced organizer for the content of the leadership module.
 - Complete one activity within Study Group Activity #2 for *approach* taken.
 - Complete one Study Group Activity for #s 3-6 for *attitudes* held.
 - Complete one Study Group Activity for #s 6-9 for *atmosphere* present.
 - Complete one Study Group Activity for #s 10-14 for *actions* taken.
- Optional Graduate Credit (one credit) – Individuals will complete additional readings and write a paper related to some of these readings. They will select 10 supplemental readings of their choice from the module on the REA website. Students will select one topic from the module in which to develop greater expertise for their school and describe its application in a short paper.

Note: This module has been drawn from previously published material, specifically the book, *Schools and Families: Creating Essential Connections for Learning*, by Sandra Christenson and Susan Sheridan (2001). In many places, the material has been used exactly or slightly modified to fit family-school partnerships relevant to students’ reading success.

Family-School Relationships as a Protective Factor

Families. Schools. The family-school relationship. Often a positive connection exists between families and educators; sometimes the family-school relationship is best described as a troubled terrain. Other times, families and educators are strangers; they “seem like people from different region of the country, each speaking the same language, but in a unique dialect” (Merseeth, Schorr, & Elmore, 1999, p. 6). Regardless of the quality of the interaction between home and school, several things are true. Consider the following:

- First, there is always a relationship between families and schools (Pianta & Walsh, 1996). Similarly, Doherty and Peskay (1992) caution that parents are always implicated, either as active or silent partners; families can provide support or distractions for children’s reading and school learning.
- Second, although families and schools are two critical systems for children’s reading and learning, they are accustomed to operating autonomously. Thus, creating a constructive family-school interface to enhance students’ reading and learning is a relatively new approach and requires a concerted effort.

- Third, family-school relationships are broader, and consequently not synonymous with parent-teacher relationships. Family may refer to grandparents, older siblings, other relatives, and, in some situations, surrogate parents such as neighbors. School includes all school personnel and the emotional climate and problem solving that occurs among the various professionals interfacing with families on the behalf of children and youth. Hence, family-school relationships focus on the interface of two systems for the purpose of socializing students as readers and learners, and enhancing the development of children and youth.
- Finally, positive family-school connections take many forms and demand site-specific development (National Association of State Boards of Education, 1992). According to Kagan (1984), strong parent involvement programs are developed with input from families and school personnel on two questions: What forms of parent participation are desirable and feasible? What strategies can be employed to achieve them? The interface between families and school must fit the specific context---or address the needs of parents, teachers, and students. Neither a “one size fits all” approach nor a focus on activities in the absence of nurturing essential attitudes among the partners will work for schools.

The goal of family involvement with education is not merely to get families involved, but rather to connect important contexts for strengthening children’s reading and learning. Family-school relationships have been described as a safety net to promote children’s learning and school experiences (Christenson, 2000). Constructing family-school relationships as a means to this end is receiving primary recognition across grade levels. For example:

- Powell (1992) noted that family involvement in early childhood has moved from the orientation of how to get parents involved to how to support families to promote positive child development.
- Similarly, the most interesting questions for school age children have moved from how to get parents involved toward what schools can do to promote positive child and family development (Smith et al., 1997).
- Pianta and Walsh (1996) emphasized the importance of establishing shared meaning across home and school to interrupt the cycle of failure for children. To move from a culture of failure to a culture of success they argued we must recognize that “School failure is at its core caused by an inability or an unwillingness to communicate---a relationship problem” (p. 24).

Relationships are viewed as a means to foster resilience. According to Wang, Haertl, and Walberg (1997),” Resilience is promoted when the resources in the school, family, and community are united and dedicated to the healthy development and academic success of children” (p. 137). **Users of this module are encouraged to apply the key principles of creating constructive family-school relationships specifically to enhancing students’ reading success.**

In the past decade, an interest in family-school relationships has increased immeasurably, due to the dramatic changes in the structure and function of families and to the consistent, cumulative findings that home environments and out-of-school time contribute to children’s learning. In

addition, school reform efforts focused only on teacher and school practices have not been overwhelmingly successful in improving student achievement, especially for low income and nonwhite students (Kellaghan, Sloane, Alvarez, & Bloom, 1993). Note the impact of federal policies and support of professional organizations on working with parents as partners. For example:

- Because of the recognition that parents play a role in developing children’s learning habits, federal policies for family involvement have been established in the National Educational Goals (National Educational Goals Panel, 1999), and further explicated in IDEA (U. S. Congress, 1999), and Title 1 (U. S. Department of Education, 1997). Most recently, Bush’s “Leave No Child Behind” legislation emphasizes family-school-community partnerships.
- Position statements from professional organizations, which reinforce federal policies, have been generated. For example, in April 1999 the delegate assembly of the National Association of School Psychologists (NASP) revised and passed a position statement on home-school collaboration. Similarly, the National PTA (1998) has developed the National Standards for Parent/Family Involvement Programs.

The need for a new social contract

There is consensus that a new social contract between families and schools, one where students, families, peers, and teachers are placed in an altered relation to one another and to the child’s education is needed. Former U. S. Secretary of Education Richard Riley seems to agree. He recently pointed out, “Parents are the essential link to improving American education, and schools have to do a better job of reaching out to them. Sending a report card home is not enough. Parents want to help their children succeed in school, and often need guidance on how to be most effective” (cited in Skoglund, 1999, p. 1).

Working with parents is often thought of as simple; after all, parents and teachers share a vested interest in children and youth. And yet, it is complex. There is common agreement for the notion that effective inclusion of parents and community with education is about: (a) supporting, teaching, and enjoying children and youth; (b) working together to promote positive outcomes for children and youth, including school completion, achievement, opportunity to learn, social functioning, and achievement; and (c) creating conditions that support children and adolescents as learners (Christenson, 1995; Epstein, 1995; Rich, 1993). An effective family-school connection is prevention-oriented and represents a 13-year contract between families and schools to provide a quality education for all students. It is essential to understand process variables (i.e., the “how”) that influence family-school connections for children’s learning to achieve a new social contract or “way of doing business.”

The four A’s: approach, attitudes, atmosphere, and actions provide a heuristic aid to conceptualize the key elements or conditions necessary for optimal school-family relationships. As you reflect on the current status of family-school relationships and critical issues facing families and educators in your school, consider the various indicators that impact the degree to which positive connections for children’s learning between families and schools exist (or can exist).

Study Group Activity #1: Identifying Critical Issues in our School -Completing the Inventory for Creating School-Family Connections. Read the inventory, which appears in Appendix A, to identify critical areas for which a change may lead to more positive connections with families. Have teachers in the building complete the inventory to obtain a collective sense of areas to change. The inventory could be used to survey or interview a sample of parents. Use this information to focus school wide planning efforts to create school-family connections for children’s reading.

Approach: The Framework for Interaction with Parents

Dialogue questions: What are the current out reach strategies for creating family-school partnerships for children’s learning and reading at your school? What roles do parents typically play? How is family involvement defined across teachers?

Approach: Central to the philosophy embodied in family and school as partners is a belief in shared responsibility for educating and socializing children and youth. From a shared responsibility perspective, the product of education- -learning- -is not produced by schools, but by students with the help of parents, educators, peers, and community professionals who support learners (Seeley, 1985). Thus, students learn because of what students do, but students “do” because of a supportive safety net between home and school. Similarly, others have called for thinking of educational partnerships as *shared goals + shared contributions + shared accountability* or a *common effort toward a shared goal*. Thus, a critical question for your schools is: Has a shared goal for enhancing children’s reading success been established across home and school? Using information from the inventory (Appendix A), the leadership team plays an instrumental role in establishing a school-wide goal.

Thinking systemically

Systems-ecological theory provides the framework for organizing the reciprocal influences between home and school. It helps to think “home *and* school”. . . and to avoid thinking “home *or* school.” When students are having trouble reading, a systems thinker never debates whether the “cause” is at home or school or elsewhere. Rather, contributing factors not causes are most relevant. Because home and school contribute to the child’s reading and learning, both contribute to the child’s level of reading performance. Thus, efforts are directed to home and school with the goal of helping the whole system work better for encouraging and supporting the child’s reading progress.

Based on general systems theory, specific organizational principles govern interactions over time between home and school (Christenson, Abery, & Weinberg, 1986). Six principles applied to family-school relationships include:

- *Circular causality.* The system is a group of interrelated individuals; thus, change in one individual affects other individuals and the group as a whole. Causality is circular rather than linear because every action is also a reaction. School difficulties affect children’s behavior

within a family, and conversely family problems influence students' achievement and/or behavior in school.

- *Nonsummativity.* The system as a whole is greater than the sum of its parts; the whole adds the property of relationship to the parts (synergism). Coordinating effort among home, school, and community resources achieves a synergistic relationship, and the notion of synergism further underscores that school-family-community together can achieve more than either alone.
- *Equifinality.* According to this principle, the same outcome may result from different antecedents. For example, families whose interactional styles are diverse may both have children who are experiencing school success. Simply stated, there is more than one path to the same goal; thus, options for family involvement and participation in children's reading are not only accepted but also expected from systems theory.
- *Multifinality.* This principle suggests that similar initial conditions may lead to dissimilar end states; thus similar home support for reading strategies may have different effects on children's progress. Therefore, a standard, uniform prescription for parental assistance with reading may achieve the desired goal for some children and families, and not for others.
- *Communication.* All behavior is regarded as communication---transmitting interpersonal messages. If home and school operate as two separate worlds, children can become burdened, carrying messages between two systems. For example, the role of message bearer for reading performance can place a heavy toll on children as well as the family-school relationship.
- *Rules.* Rules within schools and families serve to organize the respective interactions and function to maintain a stable system by prescribing and limiting an individual's behavior. The rules provide expectations about roles, actions, and consequences that guide either school or family life vis-à-vis the family-school relationship. Difficulties emerge when the rules and values of home and school are not shared and discussed. Parents may jump to conclusions about the school's disciplinary philosophy or reading program; educators may stereotype parental attitudes or behaviors. Since rules are essential to maintain the intactness of the system, a set of operating rules for the entire, overarching system of school and family is critical, especially for providing consistency of influence and ensuring generalization of interventions. Family-school partnership agreements are a helpful tool to share information and resources between home and school.

Defining the family-school relationship as essential

Pianta and Walsh (1996) described a necessary belief system for educators, one where educators understand that children develop and learn in the context of the family, and *that* system (i.e., child/family) must interface in a positive way with the school system and schooling issues for children's educational performance to be optimal. Not all educators recognize families and schools as contexts for children's learning or believe interventions should encompass the family. However, this may be considered the difference of looking at families as "essential partners" and

looking at families as “desirable extras.” How do educators in your school view the impact of home influences on children’s reading?

Also, Rimm-Kaufmann and Pianta (1999) have argued that greater consideration should be given to the development of family-school relationships early and overtime because parents are very helpful in the educational process. Their work has demonstrated that the quality of the parent’s relationship with the teacher and school personnel is as valid an indicator of a successful transition to schooling as the child’s competence in kindergarten. In fact, the quality of this relationship predicts later school success, particularly for situations where discontinuity between the systems is present.

Seeley (1985) called for individuals to move from the concept of relationships in terms of service delivery ---of “provider” and “client”; of “professionals” and “target” populations---to one of complementary efforts toward common goals. He argued:

Partners may help one another in general or specific ways, but none is ever a client, because the relationship is mutual. Providers and clients can deal with one another at arm’s length; partners share an enterprise, though their mutuality does not imply or require equality or similarity. Participants in effective partnerships may be strikingly different, each contributing to the common enterprise, particular talents, experiences, and perspectives and sometimes having different status within the relationship and control over aspects of the work to be done” (Seeley, 1985, p. 65).

Garbarino (1982), an advocate of systems theory and systems intervention for children and youth, aptly notes that support for children’s development is represented by “connections that occur whenever individuals (e.g., parents, teachers) or systems (schools, churches, families) have ongoing contact with each other that is organized around concern for the welfare of the child” (p. 125). Therefore, an approach where the significance of families for children’s reading is clear, and shared, meaningful roles are established for families and educators with respect to fostering reading success is important to establish. In comprehensive programs, family involvement is an integral part of what the school does to enhance learning opportunities and educational progress for students. To create an overall partnership philosophy, many schools have benefited from the work of Dr. Joyce Epstein, the National PTA, or conceptualization of co-roles advocated by the U.S. Department of Education for urban schools (Moles, 1993a).

Epstein’s structure for organizing family-school partnership activities

Noted researcher Joyce Epstein (1995) has delineated six types of family-school involvement, underscoring that families and schools can connect in many ways and that families can and do participate both at school and at home. Epstein has moved from traditional definitions for the involvement types. For example, “workshop” means making information about a topic available in a variety of forms, not merely a meeting about a topic held at the school building. Or “help” at home means encouraging, listening, reacting, monitoring and discussing schoolwork, not only “teaching” school subjects.

Sample practices for the six types are illustrated in Appendix B. Note that these types are broader than home support for reading, and illustrate many ideas for family involvement activities (i.e., the “what”). This structure is very helpful for organizing the connection between home and school for children’s reading.

- Type 1, *Parenting*, refers to the school assisting families with parenting skills, helping parents understand child and adolescent development, and helping families provide home conditions that support learning.
- The development of effective two-way communication about school programs and children’s progress between home and school defines Type 2, *Communicating*.
- *Volunteering*, which is Type 3, refers to school efforts in recruiting, training, and organizing families to support students and school programs.
- In Type 4, educators are encouraged to work with families to *enhance learning at home*.
- Type 5, *Decision making*, refers to involving families in school and district level decision making, including decisions for both practices and policies.
- Epstein’s sixth category of involvement is *collaborating with the community* to coordinate resources and services to families, students, and schools to enhance students’ learning and school experiences.

National standards for family involvement programs

The *National Standards for Parent/Family Involvement Programs* (National PTA, 1998), which were developed by education and parent involvement professionals, are an extension of Epstein’s (1995) six types of involvement. Each standard addresses these types of parent involvement:

- **Communicating** – Communication between home and school is regular, two-way, and meaningful.
- **Parenting** – Parenting skills are promoted and supported.
- **Student Learning** – Parents play an integral role in assisting student learning.
- **Volunteering** – Parents are welcome in the school, and their support and assistance are sought.
- **School Decision Making and Advocacy** – Parents are full partners in the decisions that affect their children and families.
- **Collaborating** – Community resources are used to strengthen schools, families, and student learning.

Accompanying each standard is a set of quality indicators that represent actions to be taken by school personnel to create positive connections for children's learning and development. These can be obtained from the National PTA (<http://www.pta.org>). According to the National PTA (2000), "Effectively involving parents requires understanding the four key roles they play in comprehensive and inclusive parent involvement programs" (p. 3). The roles are: teachers/nurturers, communicators/advisors, supporters/learners, and collaborators/decision makers.

Co-roles for families and educators

The U.S. Department of Education (Moles, 1993a) has described five roles for families *and* school personnel: co-communicators, co-supporters, co-learners, co-teachers, and co-decision makers. Two points are particularly noteworthy about this conceptualization of school-family roles.

- First, the labels used to describe the roles (e.g., co-communicator) were deliberately selected to facilitate and encourage a shared responsibility approach for children's learning. Thus, the tone for the relationship is set by the choice of language.
- Second, this conceptualization avoids thinking about roles for parents or educators in isolation. The focus is on roles within the family-school relationship. The roles are arranged as a pyramid with co-communicators at the base, followed by co-supporters, co-learners, and co-teachers with co-decision makers at the top. Each subsequent role requires more active participation, commitment, and skill; thus, they are likely to involve fewer individuals. It is assumed that all families and educators are involved as co-communicators, and fewer are involved as co-decision makers. Clearly, there are a variety of ways for parents to be involved and different levels of commitment as to how parents want to be involved. This provides a concrete way of thinking of how all families can be involved in some way, a way that is sensitive to their needs or family circumstances.

Specific examples of the co-roles are provided in Appendix C. The co-roles are:

- Family and school as *co-communicators* address the need to exchange information that enables both to assist children's learning. A variety of techniques, including written, face-to-face, telephone, formal and informal meetings, and videos are used because a primary goal of communication is to increase shared meaning and understanding about students' performance.
- Family and school as *co-supporters* address both the needs of the partners to support the child, but also the need for the partners to support each other. For example, families show support to children by providing positive encouragement for learning and to schools by attending back-to-school nights and student performances. Schools support families by being responsive to their questions and providing a welcoming climate. Teachers support families by calling at the first sign of a concern and inviting them to visit the classroom or school.
- Family and school as *co-learners* provide opportunities for educators (e.g., administrators, teachers, support personnel) and families to learn about each other and how to work together

to support student learning. For example, families want information about school procedures, policies and practices, whereas school staff needs opportunities to increase their effectiveness in communicating with parents.

- Family and school as *co-teachers* recognize the formal teaching of students in school settings and the ways families support and encourage learning at home and in the community. By working together, teachers and families can create connections and provide mutual support for each other in ways that enhance student learning.
- Finally, home and school as *co-decision makers, advocates, and advisors* focus on participation in formal organizations and committees, such as the Parent-Teacher-Student Association (PTSA) board, school site council or Principal Advisory Committee.

Why adopt a school wide shared responsibility approach?

We know schools with programs that improve student performance are comprehensive, well planned, and provide options for family involvement, which allows schools to be responsive to family diversity (Christenson & Sheridan, 2001). Consider some of the following findings:

- Many studies have demonstrated a ceiling effect with respect to achievement gains for low-income students, particularly in urban education settings. That is, students' achievement scores have been raised; however, their overall performance is still below the national average (Henderson & Berla, 1994).
- Studies that correlate levels of parent involvement with gains in student achievement invariably find that the more extensive the involvement, the higher the student achievement. In programs that are designed to be full partnerships, where the programs are comprehensive and address attitudes, philosophy, structure, and day to day practices, student achievement not only improves, it reaches levels that are standard for middle-class children (Comer, 1995; Comer & Haynes, 1991).
- Children who are the farthest behind make the greatest gains (Henderson & Berla, 1994).
- Programs and practices are stronger in schools where teachers perceive that they, their colleagues, and parents all feel strongly about the importance of parent involvement (Dauber & Epstein, 1993).
- Parents are the individuals who know what happens for their children across school years; teachers usually only have children for one year. Parents can experience discontinuity with respect to what teachers expect unless there is common agreement about the importance of family involvement in reading and learning. It has been consistently suggested that a viable strategy for good family-school relationships is to set shared goals and to establish a strong family-school relationship in kindergarten that is fostered in subsequent years (Pianta & Walsh, 1996).
- Regardless of educational level, ethnic background, or income level, parents want their children to be successful in school; however, they do not know how to assist their children. Parents report they would be willing to spend more time on activities with children if educators gave them more guidance (Epstein, 1986).

- Epstein (1995, personal communication) speculates that only a relatively small percentage of parents, approximately 10%, have personal problems so severe that they cannot work as partners with schools, given the proper assistance. She contends that parent educational level and family social class are influential factors for which families become involved in education only if school personnel don't work to involve all parents.

Study Group Activity #2: Setting a Tone for Shared Responsibility. There are three options and/or sets of material that can be used to complete this activity. Select one. The purpose of this activity is to set in motion attitudes and actions that expect parental engagement in children's reading, but provide options for involvement and opportunities to share information and resources. These activities will help you to design options for family involvement at your school. Participants are encouraged to review the three sets of materials and to choose which one best fits their school context. Note that these activities are based on work that underscores the importance of family-school teams for providing the leadership for family-school programs (see actions).

- Review sample practices for the six types of family-school partnership activities described by Epstein, which are provided in Appendix B. Create a list of sample practices related specifically to reading that are categorized according to the six types. This material may be very helpful for sharing information among teachers, explaining a shared responsibility approach to parents, and creating a family-school policy about family involvement in children's reading and learning (see actions).
- Obtain the National Standards for Parent/Family Involvement on the National PTA website: <http://www.pta.org>. Read the specific indicators for the types. Note that the indicators are formatted as a survey using a scale from "consistently evident" to "not evident" at our school. Discuss the merits and limitations of using these indicators as an opportunity to attain a picture of your school's perspective on family-school relationships. Will this survey allow you to develop a coordinated approach among teachers? A philosophy for the school that is paired with actions? A norm for a partnership orientation? If so, implement the survey and share results with the staff.
- Specific examples of five roles for families *and* school personnel: co-communicators, co-supporters, co-learners, co-teachers, and co-decision makers are provided in Appendix C. Use this structure to develop co-roles for parents and teachers that are specific to the goal of enhancing children's reading success. This material would be extremely helpful should your school decide to establish partnership agreements (i.e., parent-teacher-student contracts) for clarifying roles and responsibilities for supporting and encouraging developing readers.

Summary: Family-school collaboration is an attitude, not merely an activity. The intersection of family and school is considered vital for children's performance in reading and learning, and *the* emphasis is placed on the quality of the relationship rather than only roles (i.e., activities) to be executed by home or school. The goal of constructive family-school relationships is to change the interface between home and school to support students as readers and learners, not merely to

arrive at a solution for the immediate school-based concern (Weiss & Edwards, 1992). The view that parents are essential for children's reading and learning progress is certainly an implicit assumption of collaborative family-school relationships. A missing piece is the explicit acknowledgment, particularly in school attitudes and actions that parents are essential partners. Adopting an approach that recognizes the *significance of families* and the *contributions of schools* for children's reading and engagement with school and learning provides a necessary framework for constructive family-school connections.

Attitudes: The Values and Perceptions Held about Family-School Relationships

Dialogue questions: What are the barriers for establishing effective family-school relationships to enhance children's reading and learning? Which families are systematically excluded from your school's current out reach activities to parents?

Attitudes: Along with attitudes that foster the formation of healthy home-school relations, there are a number of attitudes that may produce barriers to the establishment of effective relationships. Parents or educators can hold these attitudes. As you consider the following, can you think of a specific incident in your school experience?

- Partial resistance toward increasing home/school cooperation.
- Assumptions made about others that are based on specific labels or structural characteristics.
- Stereotypic views of people, events, conditions, or actions that are not descriptive of behavior, but portray a causal orientation.
- Assumption that parents and teachers must hold identical values and expectations.
- Failure to view differences as strengths.
- Limiting impressions of child to observations in only one environment.
- Lack of belief in a partnership orientation to enhance student learning/development.
- A blaming and labeling attitude that permeates the home-school atmosphere.
- A win-lose rather than a win-win attitude in the presence of conflict.
- Tendencies to personalize anger-provoking behaviors by the other individual.
- Lack of perspective taking or empathizing with the other person.
- Failure to recognize the importance of preserving the family-school relationship.

When working with parents, the emergence of challenging situations is inevitable. Many times school personnel are heard describing families as "hard to reach" or as "problem parents." Characterizing families in this way places blame on individuals. Rather, it is necessary to recognize the difficulties inherent in *situations* by focusing on contextual circumstances that can be altered (e.g., "this is a challenging situation"), and not on individuals with unalterable characteristics (e.g., "this is a resistant parent"). A constructive tactic may be to frame challenges in terms of an unsatisfactory, unproductive interface between home and school. As such, this presents a problematic situation that requires the collective attention and efforts of parents and school personnel to correct.

Understanding and addressing barriers

Effective family-school relationships work to systematically remove barriers between families and educators. There is an ongoing process to identify and recommend constructive suggestions for improvement in the family-school interface rather than assigning blame. There are many ways to categorize barriers, which extend far beyond the typical logistical concerns, albeit important, of transportation and daycare. For example, the categorization of barriers by Lontos (1992)- -barriers for educators, barriers for parents, and barriers for family-school relationships- - is particularly helpful because it suggests that barriers are expected for all and the emphasis must be on understanding and removing barriers. Conceptualizing barriers for each system as well as the relationship may serve to promote perspective taking and enhance the understanding of constraints involved for all individuals.

Consider these barriers for school personnel, parents, and the partnership. Are they evident in your school? What suggestions might you and others have for removing the barriers?

➤ Barriers for school personnel:

- Ambiguous commitment to parent involvement.
- Use of negative communication about students' school performance and productivity.
- Use of stereotypes about families, such as dwelling on family problems as an explanation for students' performance.
- Doubts about the abilities of families to address schooling concerns.
- Lack of time and funding for family outreach programs.
- Fear of conflict with families.

➤ Barriers for parents:

- Feelings of inadequacy.
- Adopting a passive role by leaving education to schools.
- Linguistic and cultural differences.
- Lack of role models, information, and knowledge about resources.
- Suspicion about treatment from educators.
- Economic, emotional, and time constraints.

➤ Barriers for the partnership:

- Limited time for communication and meaningful interaction.
- Communication primarily during crises.
- Differences in parent-educator perspectives about child's performance and behavior. paired with little or no opportunity for discussion.
- Limited contact for building trust within the family-school relationship.

Another way to think about barriers is in terms of *attitudes and interactions*. Moles (1993b) focused on attitudinal barriers such as psychological and cultural differences, and interactional barriers such as the low rate of contact, limited skills and knowledge on which to build

collaboration, and restricted opportunities for meaningful dialogue. Similarly, Weiss and Edwards (1992) identified three comprehensive, key barriers:

- Limited conception by school personnel of the roles families can play,
- Psychological and cultural differences that lead to assumptions that build walls between families and educators, and
- The lack of a routine communication system, particularly to prevent misunderstandings between families and educators.

Two other important barriers/challenges

Although these descriptions of barriers seem comprehensive, it is critical to think of two others. The first is represented by the failure of educators to examine systematically school practices that “fail” families. For example, responding only in a crisis, defining (and labeling) the family solely by structure (e.g., “what can we expect; after all, this is a single parent”), and viewing the family as deficient are far too common examples of school practices that result in an uncomfortable atmosphere for discussion and interaction between families and school personnel. As a result, there is too little outreach to families and children about whom school personnel are most concerned.

Attitudes that characterize differences as deficits are often conveyed in schools. Schools in America generally typify a culture characteristic of a middle-class, educationally-oriented, Euro-American lifestyle. Further, schools tend to perpetuate the values, norms, and practices of individuals who “fit into” this culture. Families who differ are often seen as “deficient” (Davies, 1993). In many cases, there is an overemphasis on labels. Common labels often surround “what” parents and families are (such as uneducated or poor) or what they are failing to do (no follow through on teacher requests) as defined by the school’s agenda. A focus on status variables (e.g., educational level, income, family structure) rather than individuals and actions often leads quickly to stereotypes and preconceived judgments.

Concomitantly, there is a lack of attention to personal characteristics of a parent or family (“who” they are) and what they do to support their children. In fact, parents who experience diverse ethnic, cultural, socioeconomic, linguistic, and educational backgrounds *are* involved in the lives of their children, regardless of whether or not they are formally involved in their school life (Bempechat, 1998; Edwards, Fear, & Gallego, 1995). Further, many families are involved in the education of their children, albeit in ways that school personnel may not consider because they see no concrete outcome or product (Wright & Smith, 1998).

We fail as educators when we form conclusions based on what we believe families need. This is heightened when we fail to consider how families may be supporting their children’s education already. For example, educators may believe that families need help supporting their children’s homework, when they may not need that form of assistance at all. Rather, other forms of assistance, such as how to best communicate with teachers or understand school policies or practices, may be necessary. In such scenarios, it is the schools, not the families, who fail students.

The second barrier is the infrequent use of practices that focus on family *and* schools as contexts for children's reading and learning (i.e., thinking systemically). Integral to advancing outcomes for children and youth are school-based actions that include families and account for how the family-school interface – what we do together – the synergism – affects reading outcomes for students.

Attitudes influence practices

Attitudes espoused by educators (e.g., teachers, school psychologists, principals) often translate into the manner in which relationships with families are developed. Several models for interacting with families are prominent in the literature, each conveying a consistent pattern of attitudes, assumptions, and goals that structure parent-educator relationships. When these patterns occur over time, they begin to take on a history of their own (Power & Bartholomew, 1987). Developing an understanding of the alternative models is useful for understanding parent-educator relationships at a school. Swap (1993) states, “Realizing that there are different approaches to parent involvement can stimulate debate among the faculty about the most appropriate goals and assumptions for a parent involvement program and help avoid the random, scatter-shot programming for parents that is so characteristic of many schools” (p. 28).

Swap (1993) has described four different models for parent involvement: Protective, school-to-home transmission, curriculum enrichment, and partnership model. Each serves a different purpose and has inherent advantages and disadvantages. Which model best characterizes your school? Is this the model desired by staff and parents?

- The *protective model* has as its goals the protection of the school from parental interference. The model is based on the assumptions that parents delegate to schools the responsibility of, and hold schools responsible for, educating their children; and that educators accept this responsibility. The primary attitude prevalent in this model holds that schools should work independent of families to educate children -- parental involvement in decision-making or collaborative endeavors are inappropriate or unnecessary. Thus, the potential for home-school collaboration is restricted in this model, and opportunities for sharing resources and responsibilities are extinguished.
- The *school-to-home transmission model* attempts to enlist parents in supporting the school's mission as its primary goal. This model assumes that children's achievement is fostered by continuity of expectations and values across home and school. Attitudes conveyed suggest that school personnel should identify appropriate values and practices that contribute to success, and parents should reinforce the school's values and expectations. Although this model endorses the importance of the continuous interactions between home and school, it continues to be unidirectional in its influence. Parents have less input than in other models.
- The *curriculum enrichment model* recognizes the expertise that families possess, and is based on the assumption that interactions between families and school personnel can enhance curricular and educational objectives. One main attitude of this model portends that parents and educators each hold unique expertise related to curriculum and instruction. An essential

element of this model's success appears to be the degree to which educators can draw on parents' knowledge and experiences to inform instruction, rather than simply transferring school practices into home contexts. Potential problems arise when teachers see the curriculum as the centerpiece of their professional expertise (an attitude related to differences in roles), perhaps not willing to invite parents to help in curricular decisions or to think broadly about how school and home resources can be bridged in efforts to enhance curricular objectives.

- The *partnership model* to working with families endorses as its goal the desire for families and schools "to work together to accomplish a common mission... for all children in school to achieve success" (Swap, 1993; pp. 48-49). Success at accomplishing this mission requires an attitude that collaboration among parents, educators, and community members is essential. An emphasis on two-way communication, parental strengths, and mutual problem solving with parents are important aspects of this model. Furthermore, given the challenge associated with its broad and comprehensive mission, school environments must undergo a "re-visioning" that explores new policies, practices, relationships, and attitudes.

Development and implementation of a partnership model for home-school relationships requires, according to Swap, the presence of four essential elements. First, it is essential that two-way communication processes be established. According to the National PTA Standards for Parent/Family Involvement Programs (1998), regular and meaningful communication is foundational for other standards to develop. Educators may share with family members information about school programs, curriculum, and student progress. Parents can convey to school personnel information about their child's background, strengths, and characteristics. To the greatest extent possible, both parties share their thoughts and ideas about expectations, goals, and responsibilities- ideally with respect to reading.

A second element of the partnership model is the recognition that learning is enhanced at home and at school. Development occurs across settings, and various opportunities and practices pertinent to each setting are seen as integral to supporting the child in relevant ways. For example, parents can provide structure, guidance, discipline, and assistance for their children to prepare them to take advantage of learning opportunities (Scott-Jones, 1995). Likewise, teachers develop curricula, activities, and relationships with children that create optimal conditions for learning. Unique, respective, complementary roles and practices across home and school settings, that are inherent in a partnership model, maximize reading and learning.

Third, mutual support across home and school is an important element of partnerships. Parents can support educators in many ways, including activities such as fund-raising, volunteering, reading to their child, monitoring homework, or talking with their child about their school day. Teachers can support family members by keeping parents apprised of activities, functions, student responsibilities, and school progress. Such supportive gestures across parents and teachers can be instrumental in the establishment of trust.

Mutual support also suggests the ability of parents and school personnel to identify common ground on which they share priorities and concerns, and to design a plan to begin addressing

these together. This is related to the fourth element of partnership models, in which parents and educators make joint decisions at various levels. For example, decisions about an individual child's educational program may be shared, or school wide decisions concerning scheduling or other systemic issues may be the focus of partnership activities. The elements of partnerships described above reinforce the notion of "co-roles" (Moles, 1993a) introduced in approach.

To be true partners, school and family interactions must embrace collaboration as a central mode of operating. Effective collaboration is dependent on the belief that the home-school relationship is a priority. A willingness to make the relationship a priority (as reflected in such actions as creating two-way communication, increasing learning opportunities for children, providing mutual support, and engaging in joint decision-making) is a prerequisite for collaboration to occur. Various characteristics of collaboration and benefits of a collaborative approach to home-school relations are listed in Appendix D.

In collaborative relationships, there is shared ownership for identifying and working toward solutions and goals. Likewise, there is recognition of and respect for individual and cultural differences in developing and adapting to changes that come out of mutual and shared decision making. Collaboration involves both *equality* – the willingness to listen to, respect, and learn from one another, and *parity* – the blending of knowledge, skills, and ideas to enhance the relationship, and outcomes for children.

Why a collaborative model?

- One tenet of successful home-school programs is that children's educational success requires congruence between what is expected and taught at school and the expectations and values expressed at home (Fruchter, Gullotta, & White, 1992). And yet, "attempts to align schools more closely with the cultures of their students and families are still relatively rare in American education" (Fruchter et al., 1992, p. 26). The partnership orientation, in part, has been advanced to address issues of discontinuity between home and school. It also has demonstrated greater success in involving families who may be disenfranchised from schooling issues.
- The School Development Program (SDP), developed by James Comer in 1968 and first implemented in King and Baldwin Elementary Schools in the New Haven School District, has three guiding principles: Collaboration, consensus, and no-fault interactions (Comer, Haynes, Joyner, & Ben-Avie, 1996). Now implemented in over 600 schools, the Comer process has reported:
 - School-level aggregated data that demonstrate significant average 4-year gains, greater percentage of students achieving instructional objectives, and better performance on standardized achievement tests for elementary students, exceeding gains reported for the district as a whole.
 - Significant differences in academic achievement between randomly selected students in SDP schools and students in non-SDP control schools.
 - Experimental control studies in which SDP students experienced significantly greater positive changes in attendance, teacher ratings of classroom behavior, attitude toward

- authority, and group participation and reported significantly better perceived school competence and self-competence when compared to non-SDP students.
- Significant differences between SDP and non-SDP elementary students on six self-concept dimensions as well as significantly higher self-concept for SDP students than the national normative group.
 - A quasi-experimental study in which SDP schools noted significant improvement in school climate as rated by students and parents.
- Epstein's (2001) research in the past 15 years has produced helpful information on strengthening school-family-community partnerships. She has found that these partnerships grow stronger with increased levels of commitment. In a handout developed from her project, she asks: "Can you "C" the connections?"
1. Care: We care about the children and each other at this school. Families feel welcome at the school. Educators feel welcome in the community.
 2. Civility/Courtesy: We respect each other at this school and recognize our shared responsibilities for children. Teachers and families talk with and listen to each other.
 3. Clarity: We conduct clear and useful two-way communications about school programs; children's progress, talents and needs; community activities; and other topics important to families, students, the school, and community.
 4. Cooperation: We assist each other and the students. We work together to improve the school, strengthen families, and ensure student success. We try to solve problems, and we are open to new ideas. Families, educators, and community members are comfortable working with each other.
 5. Collaboration: We have a comprehensive program of school-family-community partnerships. We use an Action Team approach that enables educators, parents, students, and community members to work together over time to design, implement, and improve the six major types of involvement with all families and at all grade levels. We work as partners to help students reach important goals. We encourage discussion and debate on important issues. We celebrate progress and continually plan improvements."

Study Group Activity #3: Characteristics and Benefits of a Collaborative Approach. Read the list of general characteristics and benefits of a collaborative approach in Appendix D. Assess the degree to which school staff hold these beliefs and or view these benefits as truly advantageous in your school context. Which characteristics are evident across most staff at your school? What does the staff see as the benefits of a collaborative approach?

Study Group Activity #4: Our School's Model. Using Swap's four model types, identify your current school model for family involvement and the desired school model. Also, articulate current ways and desired ways your school accomplishes: two-way communication, enhancing

learning at school and at home, mutual support, and joint decision making. How can you implement the suggestions?

Study Group Activity #5: Conducting a Needs Assessment. Knowing the staff perspective is important. Capturing the voices of “all” parents is also important. Develop a needs assessment. (Examples can be requested). Identify groups of parents; e.g., those who are highly involved and less involved; families whose children are high achievers and low achievers, etc. Be sure the voices of all groups of parents are represented (e.g., those with and without phones). Conduct a needs assessment to determine parental perspectives. Collecting data at school functions with a follow up for nonattendees may be most viable for obtaining the information. Consider holding a raffle for reading books to make the data collection more fun for all. Use this information to inform your outreach activities with parents.

Study Group Activity # 6: Discussion Questions. The leadership team should discuss either question and formulate a response to be shared with the staff. Obtain staff input and determine consensus for operating to address the questions.

- McWilliam, Tocci, and Harbin (1998) discuss family-centered service providers as demonstrating a “friend-like” attitude toward parents, who listen to the problems and personal concerns that parents experience apart from those related to their child. This approach to parents demonstrates sincere care for parents as individuals and as partners. In school-based services, what are the appropriate boundaries between a school’s need for information and a family’s problems? Where is the line between establishing and maintaining positive rapport within a healthy relationship, and blurring the boundaries between home and school?
- How can school and community personnel assist in overcoming negative connotations that parents associate with schools? For example, the manner in which a school handles a child’s difficulties may contribute to problems in the home-school relationship. How can parental attitudes that may have built up over a long history of negative interactions with school personnel be addressed?

Summary. Attitudes are among the most salient and powerful precursors to healthy partnerships with families. Positive attitudes allow parents and educators together to identify concerns, analyze situations, develop and implement plans, and evaluate goal attainment. Problem solving, information gathering, and resource sharing are all heightened. Thinking of barriers as challenges and an opportunity to make positive changes is helpful. Understanding and systematically attempting to remove/address barriers for teachers, parents, and the partnership are important. Creating a collaborative ethic at the school level requires achieving consensus across staff about the characteristics and benefits of collaborative relationships. The attitudes parents and educators hold about each other set the stage for an atmosphere conducive for the formation of effective relationships.

Atmosphere: The Climate in Schools for Families and Educators

Dialogue questions: What are the characteristics of schools as welcoming communities? How do you know when a climate of participation exists?

Atmosphere: Schools must become welcoming, “family friendly” communities. Possible at-school and family outreach efforts that educators may consider to enhance the atmosphere in their school are presented in Appendix E.

To establish an atmosphere that is comfortable, friendly and approachable for *all* families, it is crucial that educators consider the predominant *culture of the school* (i.e., the belief systems and values that are promulgated in the school context). This culture can be imposed on family members inadvertently and communicate a lack of openness to different cultural beliefs. The attitudes this encompasses (e.g., a willingness to learn about and from each other, a recognition of individual differences within and not only between groups) are influential. If a school perpetuates beliefs about how children learn or appropriate discipline strategies, there may be little openness to differing viewpoints characteristic of some cultural groups. Consider a situation in which a school emphasizes independent work and personal accountability for student performance. A family who embraces a culture that values community efforts and maximizes group accomplishments over personal achievement may encounter roadblocks when trying to work within this school’s culture.

The ecology of the school, or its physical and structural aspects, is also important (Weiss & Edwards, 1992). Schools and classrooms that are welcoming and inviting to all families reflect the various and diverse communities from which children and parents come. Pictures, bulletin boards, books, visual images, and curricular materials should reflect the children and families of the school. Importantly, respect for families and their cultures is shown by recognizing their role in contemporary society, and not simply in traditional dress or historical renditions (Thorp, 1997).

When family members feel welcome and wanted at school, and know what their role is or can be, generally they will be better able to participate meaningfully and actively in the education of their child. Likewise, parents may be more willing to share their ideas if they feel as though school personnel will listen to and value such input. Feeling welcome can also increase parents’ participation in activities available to enhance their own and their child’s experiences. Similarly, they may be more open to support the ideas of educators and provide assistance in programs related to educational goals. Importantly, when family members recognize the school as a place (and schooling as a process) in which they belong, and the meaningful role they play, they may increase their beliefs that their efforts make a difference for their child. Unless parents feel connected, their ability to recognize the essential nature of their role is questioned.

Parents also must see how their efforts are directly related to improvement or the possibility of improvement in their children’s education. Comer (1995) identified this as the “linchpin” for parents to sustain their involvement. Parents’ sense of efficacy, or belief that they can help their child succeed in school, enables them to assume that their involvement activities may influence

their child's learning and performance in a positive way (Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1997). When parents judge that they are unlikely to be successful in involvement practices, their low efficacy might keep them from becoming involved (Lareau, 1989). Indeed, some parents place their trust completely in the schools and do not expect to play an influential role in their child's learning (Harry, 1992). Parents' perceptions of their abilities to assist in their child's development, and in the attainment of important educational goals, may be partly a function of the degree to which parents identify the school as open and approachable.

Communicating optimistic, realistic messages

True collaboration occurs when these key ingredients: Connection, Optimism, Respect and Empowerment are present (Minke, 2000; Vickers, Minke, & Anderson, 2001).. These ingredients can be summarized with the acronym CORE. Also, following a family-school interaction, the participants should feel more connected, optimistic, respected, and empowered with respect to supporting the student's reading program and overall learning progress. CORE illustrates the kinds of variables that create a desirable climate for participation between home and school. Each element is briefly described.

➤ CORE Element: Connection

- Failure to develop trusting relationships is considered central to unsuccessful collaborations. The development of shared goals and a common vision as well as effective use of conflict management strategies are considered central to the development of a successful collaboration. Thus, establishing shared goals with respect to children's reading will foster interdependence between home and school. For example, co-roles for creating positive, optimal conditions for gains in reading can be discussed and promoted.

➤ CORE Element: Optimism

Collaboration does not naturally happen and optimism among the participants is crucial. Parents and teachers would not make a commitment to collaborating unless they believed that their efforts would make a difference. Optimism in collaboration is fostered by these core beliefs:

- Problems are systems problems, not individual problems,
- No one person is to blame, and
- All concerned parties are doing the best they can.

A positive tone permeates communication. Therefore, educators will repeatedly reinforce that children will have the best year in school and can make the most progress if home and school work and plan together. Also, it is important for the parties to agree to contact each other with good news and/or if concerns arise.

➤ CORE Element: Respect

Respect encompasses:

- *Each participant brings different, but equally valid expertise to the process.* For example, parents know their children the best. Also, they have experience with their children's learning across school years. Teachers know children relative to instructional goals,

teaching strategies, and performance of others in the classroom. They know what is expected for children at a specific grade level.

- *Respect for individual expertise must be extended not just to professional groups but also to families.* For example, respect is shown to families when educators ask for their insights and view. Disagreements are not of concern; what matters is allowing the views of the participants to be shared and taken seriously.
- *Respect requires acceptance of differences.* For example, parents are concerned about the progress and welfare of their child; teachers are concerned about (and must be!) the progress and welfare of the class. This difference is a “fact of life” that must be understood so communication is not impeded. It is important to listen to parents and incorporate their suggestions. Systematic monitoring of student progress toward shared goals helps to maintain a problem solving orientation between home and school.
- **Core Element: Empowerment**
Families and educators are viewed as having strengths and competencies. Shared decision making occurs as responsibility for the optimal performance of the child necessitates a role for each party.

CORE serves as a good heuristic for thinking about delivering optimistic and realistic messages to parents about their children’s reading progress. Consider the value of the following:

- Monitoring systematically the student’s reading progress with curriculum based measures (CBM)
- Disseminating data about the student’s reading performance/progress to the parents. Include:
 - average for class (norm-referenced comparison)
 - personal progress of the student (criterion referenced)
- Using good news postcards and/or phone calls to congratulate students when they are making adequate or greater progress.
- Meeting with the parent (s) and student in a timely fashion when the child is not making adequate progress.
 - Seek ways to increase opportunities to learn at school and at home by sharing ideas.
 - Reinforce the message that if home and school support for reading are not in place, it would not be reasonable or likely that the student’s level of reading performance/progress would be optimal
 - Discuss: What does the teacher need from the parent to create the best conditions for learning for the student? What does the parent need from the teacher to create the best set of conditions for learning for the student?

Why?

Consider some key findings related to aspects of establishing a positive climate for families and educators:

- There appears to be a reciprocal relationship between a school's climate and parental involvement. That is, schools with a positive, open climate enjoy greater levels of parental participation, and schools with a high degree of parental participation tend to be characterized as having a positive climate. Furthermore, the more comprehensive the school programs are (e.g., those that are school-wide, varied, and long term), the greater the level of parental involvement (Henderson & Berla, 1994).
- Schools that are welcoming to parents in their physical environment (i.e., displaying indicators of openness around the school building) and in their psychological environment (i.e., friendly and warm staff interactions) begin to address inhibition and distrust that might impede involvement (Finders & Lewis, 1994; Leitch & Tangri, 1988; Norman & Smith, 1997).
- Parent involvement enhances a school's climate in many ways. Likewise, school climate can facilitate or inhibit parent involvement. Dauber and Epstein (1993) reported that parental involvement programs were strongest when there was school-wide agreement about the importance of a positive school ecology. Also, Bell (1985) reported teachers need to feel supported and "in synch with each other" before they are open to varied parent involvement efforts.
- A school's climate is especially important for families from groups that have typically felt disenfranchised by institutions in the United States (Lareau, 1987). Some parents do not feel as though they have equal power to make decisions about their child (Harry, 1992). A personal history or experience of repeated or ongoing inequity and discrimination may encourage some parents (e.g., those from low socioeconomic conditions or ethnic minority groups) to refrain from participating in visible ways, and in questioning or addressing school staff directly. In fact, some have suggested that repeated interactions between families and schools take on their own stylistic patterns, and the climate thus developed becomes routinized over time (Doherty & Peskay, 1992; Power & Bartholomew, 1985). This is a problem when it discourages a constructive problem solving dialogue, even when that is desired by both parents and teachers (Swap, 1993).
- Parents want to know that their child's teachers care about and hold high, realistic expectations for their child's learning. It is very important for educators to believe in the children's ability to learn and make continual progress. An emphasis on the conditions (school and family support) helpful for improving the student's learning has been shown to be critical for guiding the collaborative process in an effective way (Ames, 1993; Comer, 1995; Rich, 1993).

Study Group Activity # 6: Tape of O'Hearn School. The O'Hearn School, a very diverse school in the Boston area, educates children from low -income backgrounds. It has improved children's learning and academic performance substantially across the last decade. A tape of the attitudes and atmosphere with respect to family-school relationships at O'Hearn can be checked

out from the instructor. Watch the tape and determine three defining features of the O'Hearn practices that are relevant to your school setting. Begin a process of sharing these with the staff. How might you implement the strategies this year?

Study Group Activity #7: Developing a Win-Win Attitude. Read the responses in Appendix F. Identify those that could be stated comfortably during brainstorming and problem solving with parents. How do the win-win responses influence the planning process for the student? In what ways are they useful for interacting with parents in your school? Are there risks in responding this way? If so, what are they? How can they be addressed? Try out some of the responses in a few sessions with parents. To what degree did you find these responses helpful?

Study Group Activity #8: Discussion Question. What are some strategies for establishing open, two-way communication with parents and at the same time remaining aware of boundaries between home and school? Where is the line between friendly and helpful communication (e.g., rapport building/collaboration), and privacy rights of parents and schools?

Study Group Activity #9: Design an optimistic but realistic message for parents and students. For this activity, you might want to work with a few parents to obtain their guidance and feedback. What is your process for delivering optimistic, hopeful messages to parents whose children are having difficulty learning to read? How will you ensure that the message is realistic, providing the parents with accurate information about the child's reading skill level? What suggestions will you make to enhance students' learning opportunities?

Summary: An atmosphere that facilitates collaborative, home-school partnerships is one that is characterized by trust, effective communication, and a mutual problem-solving orientation (Christenson, 1995). The physical as well as psychological messages conveyed through the school's climate could serve to enhance or inhibit parental involvement. Likewise, it can contribute to or impede the productivity of family-school relationships. It is the responsibility of both educators and parents to communicate openly and honestly to build a climate conducive for meaningful and effective interactions on behalf of children. Of particular importance is the degree to which educators have examined the school climate to ensure that it is welcoming to *all* families. Also, the probability that parents will be more involved is higher when optimistic and realistic messages are conveyed to parents about children's reading and educational progress.

Actions: Strategies for Building Shared Responsibility for Reading and Educational Outcomes

Dialogue questions: At your school, what are examples of family-school partnership strategies that are done school-wide? Are there current strategies that are done only at one grade level or by one teacher? Should these be adopted to create a school-wide philosophy and goal for improved family-school connections for children's reading success and learning?

Actions: Working effectively with families is a characteristic of effective schools (Edmonds, 1979). However, the nature of family-school relationships in a particular school is influenced by

the role, belief system and philosophy of the principal. Principals set the expectation for involvement as well as the tone for interaction (e.g., nonblaming, inviting), encourage the development of meaningful roles for families, and provide the opportunity for initial and sustained interaction between families and educators. Effective principals take partnering with families very seriously. They ensure that parents know how and when to contact them; in a sense, they create an open door policy with parents. And, they do so with genuine friendliness. It is not uncommon to see principals have office hours such as “Carol’s Corner” or grade level breakfasts to increase interaction opportunities with parents and to provide for parent input on school practices and educational concerns. They also realize that parent input must be reflected in school policies and practices, and good communication about how parent and educator input influences school policies and practices are necessary.

Principals recognize the value of focusing on improving reading for all students, and the value of doing this in a relentless way. As a member of the leadership team, ask yourself: *What message does your school provide to all parents about reading? How is this message reinforced? How is this message delivered across school years? What kinds of supports are provided to parents so they can act on the message (be involved)?*

It is valuable for schools to develop a common goal with respect to students’ reading performance. For example, school personnel may decide that reading is the most important content area to impact. Thus they will set reading goals such as ___% of students will be reading at grade level at the end of the year, all students will show a 1.0 grade equivalent gain in reading, or # of books will be read by every student. There are advantages if the reading effort is advertised using a logo (name of reading program, e.g., Reading Stars at _____School). Parent input on the design of the program is also beneficial. A consistent message about the importance of reading at school and at home – in school and out-of-school – to be a reading star or good reader should be given to all parents, and it must be repeated throughout and across school years. In other words, the school must develop the perception that reading success for all is a primary school level goal. This media campaign continues all year and across school years. Therefore, refrigerator notes (i.e., monthly updates on reading activities) have been shown to be a helpful way to maintain the focus on reading throughout the school year.

In this module, five broad actions that the leadership team can use to develop school wide goals and to support teachers’ efforts are:

- Establishing a family-school partnering policy
- Implementing family-school teams
- Creating a planning process
- Building shared responsibility for educational outcomes
- Handling unique situations

These actions will support a school wide goal of improving reading and can help to serve as mechanisms for reinforcing and delivering the message that parents are essential to their children’s learning success. Consider this logo and equation for achievement outcomes:

Students' Reading Success: Parents are Important! **Parents + Teachers + Students = Success**

School personnel must consider the approach adopted toward the role of families, the degree to which constructive attitudes between families and educators exist, and the atmosphere or climate present for participation and interaction between families and educators in their particular school context. Approach, attitudes, and atmosphere are the “backdrop” for the actions described.

Establishing a family-school partnering policy

School and district policies (e.g., mission statements) and state and federal policies and regulations (e.g., mandated roles for parents in Title 1 and special education) provide a necessary but insufficient framework within which practitioners operate. A commonly held vision across stakeholders, apparent in both written policies and administrative support for parent involvement, is considered key in district wide reform of parent involvement (Williams & Chavkin, 1989). To have an effect on the actions of families and educators, policies must be visible and known. Davies (1987) has advocated that policies on parent involvement must also be supported by mechanisms for monitoring, enforcing, and providing technical assistance. However, not everything can be mandated. For example, what really matters, such as trust between home and school, cannot be mandated (Comer, 1995). Also, school personnel and families know collaboration works best when individuals are “motivated not obliged” to work together (Christenson, Rounds, & Franklin, 1992).

District level policies often link to state and federal policies and are a component of the district’s school improvement plan. Also, district or school level policies may facilitate and/or inhibit the involvement of parents and the community in educational processes, programs, and practices. An issue is that “school level policies and expectations tend to center on what parents can provide for teachers and schools rather than *what teachers and schools can provide for parents*” (Rutherford, Billig, & Kettering, 1995, p. 15). Without a clearly articulated policy about family involvement in education across grade levels, no one should be surprised that parent involvement varies (Zellman & Waterman, 1998).

Developing both district and school level policies for working with families as partners to achieve greater school success for students is critical. The guidelines provided by the National Coalition for Parent Involvement in Education (1990) may prove helpful when discussing the role of policy at your school. According to this coalition, policies should contain the following:

- Opportunities for all parents to become involved in decision making about how the parent/family involvement programs will be designed, implemented, assessed, and strengthened.
- Outreach to encourage participation of parents who have low-level of literacy skills and/or for whom English is not their primary language.
- Regular information for parents about the objectives of educational programs and their child’s participation and progress in those programs.
- Professional development for teachers and staff to enhance their effectiveness with parents.

- Linkages with special service agencies and community groups to address key family and community issues.
- Involvement of parents of children at all ages and grade levels.
- Opportunities for parents to share in decision making regarding school policies and procedures affecting their children and to assist in the instructional process at school and at home.
- Recognition of diverse family structures, circumstances, and responsibilities, including differences that might impede parent participation. The person(s) responsible for a child may not be the child's biological parent(s) and policies and programs should include participation by all persons interested in the child's educational progress.

Rafaelle and Knoff (1999) have cautioned educators “to examine the organizational climate that exists within our schools and the (often covert) messages about involvement that we send to parents from the beginning of their child's school experience” (p. 449). Accordingly, effective partnering with parents adheres to four specific beliefs and behaviors:

- It is proactive rather than reactive.
- It involves the sensitivity to and respect for the cultural backgrounds of students and families.
- It recognizes and values the important contributions parents, regardless of their formal educational experiences, make in the educational process.
- It engenders parental empowerment through positive, meaningful two-way communication between home and school based upon mutual respect and trust.

Integral to the success of partnering with families is for these beliefs and behaviors to be reflected in school and district level policies and to become part of the school norms. Committed leadership, training for teachers and parents, clarity about home and school roles and responsibilities, and options for families are examples of necessary support to be considered by principals and others in the development of a family involvement policy.

Other guidelines for policy development that successful schools have used are:

- The process of developing policies should include the key stakeholders (parents, teachers, students, community professionals).
- Make the policy very visible. It must permeate communication between home and school. Discuss the policy at relevant times such as back-to-school night, parent-teacher conferences, and home visits with nonattendees.
- Alter the school's welcome sign. Rather than “report immediately to the office,” consider a version of: “Welcome! At our school we believe teachers, parents, and community professional enhance the learning success of students. Please stop in the office and introduce your self. We want to meet you.”

Implementing family-school teams

The family-school team is a primary mechanism to alter the typical course for interacting with families. The social and physical distance between families and school personnel is great in many schools; in urban schools the distance is compounded by significant, yet rich cultural

diversity. Families and educators, who often feel like strangers, far too often interact only when there is a problem, and far too often try to resolve the problem without first developing a foundational relationship. Families and schools tend to be quite autonomous. The saying “the shortest distance between two strangers is a story” is appropriate -- both home and school need to share their story about issues, concerns, observations of children, effect of interventions, and suggestions for improving the family-school connection and children’s learning.

The team provides this opportunity. It establishes that the tone for the partnership is that both family and school are essential, namely that “we” (not “you” or “I”) can address mutual concerns about children’s reading progress and together provide improved reading experiences for students. Teams convey the attitude that parents and educators have equal power in decisions that are made on behalf of students.

Parent participation in decisions that affect their children has taken several forms in schools, including parent advisory councils (PACS), school-based management teams, PTA/PTO, and other committees in schools. The concept of family-school teams differ from typically functioning PACS, which are often only advisory to educators and principals, suggesting that parent input is sought and helpful, but may not necessarily be used, in school-based decisions. In contrast, family-school teams emphasize the elements of collaboration, particularly shared decision making, which has been redefined by Epstein (1995) “to mean a process of partnership, of shared views and actions toward shared goals, not just a power struggle between conflicting ideas” (p. 705).

Family-school teams have been conceptualized in several ways. Three examples are:

- Epstein (1995) advocated for an action team to develop a comprehensive, coordinated family-school partnership program by organizing, implementing, and evaluating options for new partnerships that represent her six types of family involvement across grades K-12.
- The School Planning and Management Team (SPMT) of the Comer School Development Program (Comer et al., 1996) sets policies and practices for the school to enhance children’s development in six areas. In the Comer model, the SPMT listens to parents and addresses parents’ needs and listens to educators and addresses educators’ needs. Parents and educators are valued, active participants, and consensus is obtained to address concerns expressed by educators or by families.
- The purposes of PATHS---Parents and Teachers Heading to Success (Sinclair, Lam, Christenson, & Evelo, 1993) was to share information and resources to address concerns of mutual interest and to find mutually supportive ways to enhance student learning and outcomes. PATHS designed changes in home-school communication, sex education curricula, and homework policies, all of which were mutually agreed upon by parents and educators.

Regardless of the purpose or format of the team, there seems to be common agreement that strong partnerships develop over time and depend on both interactions between the partners (e.g., exchanging information, clarifying responsibilities) and actions (e.g., assessing strengths and

needs, setting goals, planning projects, implementing practices, evaluating results) to enhance student success in school. Teams often have a name, such as PATHS (Parents and Teachers Heading to Success), TGIF (Teachers Getting Involved with Families), FAST (Families and Schools Together), and BEST (Better Educational Support Team).

Benefits of a Team Approach

The benefits of a family-school team go far beyond developing a family-school partnership program, albeit, some of these are less tangible. Some include:

- A structured way for parents and educators to study and intervene on a concern that is relevant to a specific school (e.g., improving reading outcomes).
- Means to address issues that can only be resolved well with home and school input (e.g., homework, suspension, discipline, attendance, career aspirations, dropouts, poor achievement, valuing education).
- A regular, ongoing, structured and systematic means for family-school interaction.
- An easily accessible, permanent contact point for parents and teachers when they have concerns and questions, desire clarification, or have an innovative idea for supporting and engaging students as readers/learners.
- Increasing parent-educator contact and interaction over time.
- Opportunity for input from the many voices represented in the school community.
- Providing continuity about school and family expectations for reading.
- Providing mutual support for the benefit of students (e.g., reading, homework, anger management, compliance).
- Mechanism for observing and monitoring the dynamic quality of developing stronger partnerships between families and schools.
- Mechanism for circumventing blame by reducing subjectivity or jumping to conclusions about the other partner through sharing information about the resources or barriers (i.e., constraints) of each system for addressing the presenting concern.

The family-school team is an ideal vehicle for explicitly focusing on the connection between family and school for children's school performance. Thus, an effectively functioning team engages in much information sharing about family and school goals, expectations, policies and practices. As a result, it may discuss such questions as:

- What are parents, educators, and students' rights, roles and responsibilities, and resources for enhancing students' reading performance?
- What does it mean to call at the first sign of a problem or concern?
- What are meaningful roles for parent and teacher participation?
- How can parents and educators support each other in efforts for improving students' reading as well as other topics (e.g., development of after school programs)?

Creating a Team

When creating a family-school team, an initial, important consideration is its membership (i.e., who serves on the team). There is general agreement in the literature that a team should be

comprised of key stakeholders with respect to children's learning. Consider the following points when designing a team:

- Epstein (1995) has suggested including three teachers from different grade levels, three parents with children in different grade levels, one administrator, possibly a member from the community at large, and others central to the school's work with families.
- Involve parents from diverse backgrounds and with varying experiences at school. Various voices in the school need to be represented; therefore, parents from different ethnic and social class backgrounds, parents with different educational and skill levels, parents whose children are performing with varied academic success, and parents who are more and less involved at school are examples of categories of "voices" to be considered for participation.
- Over-representing parents, particularly in urban areas, is an efficient way to maintain a "critical mass" of parents available to attend regularly scheduled team meetings.
- Although team membership may be based on parent and teacher interest or parent interest and teacher assignment, it is most appropriate to select members in a way to attain the broadest representation of parent and educator perspectives.

Team Procedures

Based on the written material available on family-school teams, several points are offered for consideration of the leadership team. They are:

- *Procedures for operating as a cohesive team must be developed.* Teams tend to select either a needs driven approach to teamwork or referral oriented approach. For the former, agenda items to be addressed can be generated by the team in concert with priorities that they have identified. For example, consider an elementary school whose action team identified the need to establish a family center in the school, and held meetings to develop and implement an action plan around that priority. They followed a structured problem-solving approach to determine goals, objectives, and resources available to develop the family center. At their meetings, they also brainstormed ways to attain needed resources, set up and "run" the family center, assess possible uses of the family center based on input of the families and the school, and evaluate its effectiveness. Alternatively, teams can adopt a referral procedure to address ongoing issues that arise. For example, at an initial PATHS meeting, team members generated a list of home-school concerns, which included home-school communication, homework, study skills for students, discipline, use of out-of-school time, ways to promote self-esteem, and ways parents and teachers contribute to students' success in school. The list, which was continuously reviewed and modified, served to maintain the focus on addressing concerns important to families and educators at an urban middle school. It is important that meetings themselves are organized and semi-structured.
- *Process-related beliefs shared by team members should be explicated.* Beliefs for working together must be shared and reiterated. Examples of these from PATHS were:
 - Differences of opinion are OK and helpful.
 - Conflict is natural and can be managed.

- A good action plan satisfies parents', teachers', and students' needs.
 - Both parents and teachers are important for student success in school. Parents and teachers have inadequate information about youth because they see them in only one context.
- *Ground rules need to be established and reviewed at each meeting.* For example, when PATHS was working on promoting home-school communication, the ground rules were:
- Every participant is a consultant or coach for both parents and teachers.
 - This is a brainstorming session -- participants share what they think.
 - This is also a planning session of action -- participants will follow up on activities.
 - The focus of our discussion is on solutions that benefit all students rather than on concerns about a specific student.
- *Another consideration concerns the language used by the team members, and the facilitator in particular.* An honest but positive orientation during team discussions is important and should be maintained. Words used to convey certain messages must be selected carefully. For example, on PATHS there was no focus on problematic individuals. Rather, the focus was on problematic situations between home and school (e.g., lack of communication). Concerns rather than problems were discussed because concerns imply caring, whereas problems can have the tendency to increase defensiveness. And, concerns can be reframed to goals---what families and schools want to achieve to foster positive school experiences for students.

In team meetings, conversations can be facilitated so that perspective taking between home and school is actively practiced. It is important to elicit parents' and teachers' feelings and desires about a situation. It is equally important for each party to think about the other's feelings and desires. The facilitator can reinforce that the team goal is to enhance students' academic and behavioral success in school. When the facilitator emphasizes understanding the issue, team members can be asked to consider:

- What is the issue?
- What do I need to say about the issue?
- What do I need to understand from others about the issue?
- How can we develop a better action plan?
- Important questions during evaluation include: What did you need? What did you get? How did it work?

Of the lessons learned over two years of implementing PATHS using these principles, two stand out.

- First, the importance of non-blaming interactions was apparent. In general, PATHS parents and teachers did not engage in "blaming the other system," perhaps because of the clearly focused purpose of the team, skill of the facilitator, or the structure provided by problem solving. However, team members were known to slip into the "world of blame." For example, even after two years of operation, team members found themselves engaged in finger-pointing behavior when a new issue was discussed. It is encouraging, however,

that they quickly identified their unproductive behavior and focused common efforts toward a shared goal. They had learned to listen, understand that different perspectives were acceptable, and create a plan that addressed the needs of students, families, and schools

- The second lesson, and perhaps most poignant, was that the concept of the family-school connection for student success in school had to be salient. The group facilitator was very persistent about ensuring that the goal of PATHS— partnerships for student learning— was dominant.
- Although it is ideal for the team to focus on preventive and proactive strategies, the team also serves as a concrete forum for addressing concerns about students' learning progress, and for maintaining communication and handling conflict. As the team functions, trust between home and school is built through a common knowledge base that comes from addressing mutual concerns and problem solving. Structured problem solving that purposefully includes information sharing, particularly about resources and constraints at school or at home, is essential. In structured problem solving, team participants must be concerned first with understanding, and second with being understood.

A structured problem-solving framework can also be appropriate for teams to identify priorities, analyze resources and constraints, brainstorm alternatives, select specific strategies, develop an action plan, implement the chosen procedures, and evaluate the outcomes. Problem solving includes parents; it does not control parents. Teams may find a structured problem solving approach such as this one helpful in addressing concerns or priorities:

- Stop. Think about the concern at home and at school.
 - Describe the concern in each setting.
 - How does the concern affect the teacher/classroom?
 - How does the concern affect the parent/home?
- What are some choices/options for changing the current practice?
- Choose one after considering consequences for each system.
 - What consequences do teachers/school personnel envision?
 - What consequences do parents envision?
- Try the option.
 - What resources or support do teachers need?
 - What resources or support do parents need?
- How did it work?
 - What were the benefits for students, teachers, and families?
 - What changes should be made?

In sum, a family-school team is a vehicle for developing constructive family-school connections, addressing myriad parent and teacher concerns about students, and providing a structure for routine communication on system level issues. It will be a particularly helpful mechanism for refining the home-school support for reading effort. An evidence-based, regular, and systematic media campaign conducted by the family-school team holds much promise in setting the stage

for positive connections and other family-school interventions (Rich, 1993). Teams are flexible in that members can and should vary to address the needs of the specific school community. For example, student members may be included to address specific issues (e.g., homework completion). Successful team process is characterized by negotiation and consensus and shifting discussion from complex rhetoric to specific and solvable problems. Teams are not, however, a panacea. The use of the team would be inappropriate if either parents or educators are too emotionally involved, upset because of previous personal experience with the topic of discussion, or have a hidden agenda to use the team to advance their own perspective to meet the needs of a specific child.

Why?

- Epstein (1995) has demonstrated multiple benefits when parents are actively involved in decision making. For example, students were aware of family representation in school decisions and, as a result, were provided with a congruent message about school behavior. Feeling of ownership of school and shared experiences and connections with other families were identified as some of the parental benefits, while benefits for teachers included awareness of parent perspectives in policy development and school practices.
- Parent participation in school governance has been shown to enhance school climate and academic and behavioral outcomes for elementary students (Comer, 1995; Comer & Haynes, 1991; Eccles & Harold, 1996).
- Davies, Burch, and Johnson (1992) recommend that teams select a focused topic or question and use structured interviews with school personnel and parents to gather data on current practices and attitudes about the topic. Implemented in elementary and middle schools, a variety of topics have been studied and addressed using this approach. For example, the Attenville Elementary School action research team learned "that increasing parent involvement is a sum of personal connections to families, whose ties to the school are nurtured over time. To help them make the connections between individual parents' increased involvement and changes in children, the action research team designed a three-part portfolio (collection of materials compiled over time) approach" (Davies et al., 1992, p. 17). The school's parent involvement strategies are documented in a school portfolio. Families' attendance at school events, contacts with schools, and resources and skills are documented in a family portfolio. The contents of a student portfolio are jointly determined by parents and teachers and provide a picture of student progress over time.

Creating a planning process

In 1984, Kagan asked two questions that are helpful for planning school wide efforts: What forms of parent participation are desirable and feasible? What strategies can be employed to achieve them? These questions, if answered, allow the school, perhaps through the family-school team, to design a program that has a higher probability of meeting the needs of students in the school. The most effective family-school partnership activities are context specific. These questions can be applied to developing a school wide reading effort.

Epstein (1995) has developed a viable planning process for consideration of educators. She found that a school wide effort to partner effectively with families takes three to five years, and constant attention and modification to address student, parent, and teacher needs. The process entails asking questions about current strengths, needed improvement, and reaching all families followed by planning a comprehensive program. Although her process has been designed for educators to develop a comprehensive program that includes her six types of partnership activities, the process can be applied specifically to reading and emphasize some types more than others. Thus, school personnel are encouraged to be context specific. Questions to be answered are:

- What are the strong points right now in your school's programs or practices for involving families in their children's education (reading)? Think of your school's practices at each grade level that involve parents at school and at home.
- What are some weak spots right now in your school's practices of partnership with family and community groups? What needs to be improved or added to the program? Think of needs at each grade level such as better communication from school to home, volunteers, how parents could help children at home, or other improvement.
- In your school, who are the parents who are the hardest to reach? How might more parents, different parents, or all parents be involved and better informed about school programs and their children's progress? Think of each grade level and consider families where both parents work, where there is a single parent who works during the day, those who cannot read, those who cannot speak English well, young parents, and other "Hard-to-reach" families.

The process includes developing a three-year plan and a one-year implementation plan. Regular meetings are held. Planning forms are readily available in Epstein, Coates, Salinas, Sanders, & Simon (1997) or from the instructor.

Building shared responsibility for educational outcomes

Family-school teams stimulate a new social contract between families and schools for children's learning, one where families and educators are placed in an altered relation to one another (i.e., shared responsibility) and to the education of children and youth. Schools alone cannot solve the problems, such as poor reading skills, of today's students. If we are going to improve reading and learning outcomes, it is imperative that parental responsibility for educational and developmental outcomes for children and youth be increased. Although standards for students are being set across the nation (e.g., competency tests), clearly articulated support roles for teachers and parents to assist students in attaining the standards are less apparent.

School personnel do not interact with a monolithic family, and there are a myriad of experiences and histories that families bring to school with them. For example, we know that some families do not know the best way to support or foster children's school progress; some families are uncertain about their role; some families are unclear about policies and procedures in schools; some families, as result perhaps of their own schooling, believe in separate roles and responsibilities between home and school; and some families see schools as their second home.

With the exception of anecdotal information, there has been little to no systematic study of intergenerational experiences on family participation in education.

Building shared responsibility for educational outcomes, or what Swap (1993) referred to as “a norm for collaboration,” requires educators to change the “way they do business.” One way to enhance shared responsibility is to identify current ways families and educators connect, and then alter the existing structure (i.e., social compact) to build in responsibility for parents, educators, and students. Such an approach is consistent with the conceptualization of co-roles for families and schools presented in approach (Moles, 1993). It is also consistent with two tenets of effective family involvement programs:

- Parents are their children’s first teachers and have a lifelong influence on children’s values, attitudes, and aspirations, and
- Children’s educational success requires congruence between what is taught at school and values matched at home (e.g., Fruchter et al., 1992).

In Appendix G, activities that represent common points of contact between families and schools have been altered to invite parent participation and to increase parental responsibility for student learning. The contrast between the traditional and partnership approaches illustrate how school practices can be changed to expect and encourage parent participation. It also illustrates how educators’ attitudes and beliefs influence the school practice in place. In schools where partnerships with families are highly valued and supported, newsletters would have a column entitled, “Our Half/Your Half; school handbooks would address parents and teacher questions; workshops would invite parents to help resolve an educational concern; and parent-teacher conferences are considered co-learning opportunities. Furthermore, activities are conceptualized as shared responsibility for student learning. Thus, a parent volunteer program is not conceptualized to assist teachers. Rather, volunteering is conceptualized as tangible evidence that parents believe education is important and learning is valued, educators believe parents are essential, and interaction between parents and school personnel provides positive modeling for children and youth.

Handling unique situations

Two situations, far too familiar for many educators, are:

- The need to use thorough and persistent efforts to reach families.
- The need to resolve conflict with families.

Involving the Uninvolved

With respect to reaching uninvolved families, consider these quotes:

“The difference between parents who participate and those who do not is that those who do have recognized that they are a critical part in their children’s education.” (Delgado-Gaitan, 1991)

“Much like partners in business, partners in education must work hard to clarify their mutual interests in the children they share.” (Epstein, 1995)

Thorough and persistent efforts are needed to involve some families at their children’s school and with their learning. When parents are not involved, especially if school personnel have tried several strategies unsuccessfully, it is very easy to conclude that the parents are uninterested. Although it is easy to understand educators’ feelings (and even labeling of parents) under these conditions, relationships with parents are built when educators are nonjudgmental and respectful. Families who are not readily responsive to the school’s outreach efforts may be unwilling to meet, may be defensive or in denial after a long history of negative interactions with schools and social service institutions, and may not see the service provider as able to address problems facing the family or community.

To understand how to engage some families, it is helpful to realize the importance of meeting parents on their own level. Cochran and Dean (1991) have demonstrated that empowerment is a process not an end state. It begins with encouraging parental sense of self-efficacy (i.e., parents able to see their ability to contribute), advancing to opportunities for parents to build relationships with teachers or other parents, and ending with asking parents to take social action (e.g., decision making). Schools have found that it is never a good idea to ignore parents’ disengagement or lack of involvement. They have also found that their outreach efforts must create a spirit of cooperation to meet children’s needs (Edwards, 1992).

Newer school practices for reaching uninvolved families include:

- Systematic identification of families who are excluded from currently used family outreach activities.
- Keeping interaction focused on genuine interest in improving the child’s school success and experience.
- Linking parents’ efforts to their goals for their children’s education.
- Making regular, ongoing contact.

Successful school practices systematically identify families who are not responding to current outreach activities and reach out to them through personal contacts (positive phone calls, home visits). Information is provided about the child’s school performance, the importance of the parents’ role in their children’s schooling is explained, parents are invited to cooperate in a way they choose, and parents may be asked why they are uninvolved or what the schools can do to assist them in supporting their children’s learning. It is helpful for educators to ask parents: What resources or support would be helpful so you can support your child’s learning?

Successful school practices always keep interaction focused on genuine interest in improving the child’s school success. The reason for the contact is to invite input from parents, not simply to inform them, and never to “fix the family” or hand the problem over to the family. Parents are included as an equal member of the problem-solving team, both for identification of the students’ needs and for ideas for intervention.

Successful school practices strive to understand parents' goals for their children's education. Families need to be supported in their efforts to educate their children in ways they see fit (importance of goal setting with families, being a resource to families to achieve what they want). According to Bempechat (1998), however, families also need to understand that without making education a top priority, optimal school performance of students should not be expected. It is very helpful to explore with families what they want schools to accomplish and to understand their hopes and desires for their children (Malatchi, 1997; Thorp, 1997). Parents' participation is most widespread and sustained when they believe their participation is directly linked to their children's performance (Rich, 1987). Seeing their efforts linked to their belief about the purpose of education has recently been identified as important (Bempechat, 1998).

Finally, successful school practices are thorough and persistent. Regular ongoing contact is made with families. Information about the child's school performance and an invitation to the parent to work with the school are provided. *If the parent chooses not to participate, school personnel can explain they will do their part at school; however, they can make it clear that they believe this is only part of the picture and they know the child would perform better if the school and parents would work together to achieve a shared goal for the children's learning. Without the shared effort, the probability the child will perform less well on school tasks is increased.*

A summary of additional ideas, specific to the content area of reading, for reaching uninvolved families appears in Appendix H.

Conflict Resolution

With the respect to the importance of conflict resolution, consider this quote:

"When elephants fight it is the grass that suffers." (Kikai Proverb)

Educators do not like conflict with parents. Some avoid conflict---and even differences of opinion--- with parents, and as a result they delay making contact with parents at the first sign of concerns. Many have had limited contact with parents of students they instruct, which makes reporting their concerns more difficult. Undoubtedly, the media's negative reporting on schools and learning status for specific groups of students has contributed to educators feeling they are solely responsible for educational outcomes.

Differences are not necessarily detrimental to the relationship; in fact, different perspectives are healthy in collaborative relationships (Christenson & Sheridan, 2001). Differences in opinions and viewpoints are inevitable in encounters between parents and school personnel. Parents and educators, by virtue of their respective relationship with the child, hold different perspectives. For example, parents are concerned with their child's individual progress and needs, and they have an emotional involvement with their child. Educators, on the other hand, are concerned with the progress and needs of the whole class or group, and they are able to distance themselves from the child, taking a more rational/cognitive approach. These contextual differences can result in potential communication difficulties if the differing perspectives are not discussed and

understood. Also, both parents and educators primarily see the child in only one environment and assume the child's behavior is similar in other environments. Thus, when a parent says, "We don't have that problem at home," that may be a true statement. Or if educators say, "That parent is way too emotionally involved," perhaps what is forgotten is that children need a strong attachment to their parents. In reality, signs of frustration and perhaps limited problem solving are being expressed with these statements.

Newer practices stress the development of constructive attitudes and acquisition of conflict resolution skills to manage effectively conflict and strengthen the development of constructive partnerships (Margolis & Brannigan, 1990). With respect to attitudes, educators understand the difference between conflict and blame, between pseudo conflicts and substantive conflicts, and realize that conflicting perspectives do not need to result in a hostile transaction. The family-school team (or action team) is an ideal mechanism to discuss and debate different points of view for the purpose of designing an improved plan for meeting students needs. Team members engage in perspective taking and two-way communication is encouraged by asking:

- What is the issue/concern?
- What do I need to say about the issue (specific, observable language)?
- What do I need to understand from the parent about the issue?
- How can we develop a better plan/practice to address the concern?

Newer school practices use a non-adversarial approach for managing conflicts and consist of at least three well-developed skills.

- First, schools are finding that structured problem solving that aims toward consensus (i.e., agree to try the plan) and satisfying the needs of parents, teachers, and the student facilitates constructive interaction. Although there are several conflict resolution structures (e.g., SOLVE), all follow a variation of the following steps: Identify the desired outcome or goal, explore values and perspectives around the goal, discuss factors that enhance or impede goal attainment, explore options for achieving the goal, develop a plan, and evaluate movement toward the goal.
- Second, educators use negotiation skills such as viewing the person separate from the concern/issue to develop a win-win perspective when resolving conflicts. It is important to focus communication on mutual interests by asking, "How can we work together because it is important for the future learning and academic success of the student?"
- Third, educators employ helpful strategies when a parent is angry. Some examples include meeting with parents as soon as possible, allowing parents an opportunity to tell their story paired with empathic listening, acting as a problem solver, and focusing on present and future interactions. Employing a mediator is a viable strategy should the situation present either extremely intense or intractable differences, making the resolution of conflict difficult and seemingly unrealistic.

Study Group Activity # 10: Family-School Partnering Policy. Create a family-school policy that is accepted by the staff and parents at your school. Check district level policy to ensure

consistency. Consider modifying the policy to meet the specific needs of students with respect to reading in your building. What does your policy provide for teachers, parents, and students? Does it directly apply to reading? The family-school or action team is an ideal mechanism to craft school-wide (and district-wide) messages about conditions that promote children's reading success, importance of continuity and consistency across home and school about the value of learning, and ways to engage students as learners in school and at home. Be sure key stakeholders are aware of the policy.

Study Group Activity # 11: Family-School Teams. Using the guidelines presented in the module, create a family-school team to guide the school wide reading program. Implement the program for at least one year. Evaluate the success of the team in disseminating messages about the shared goal of reading, handling concerns with respect to the program, designing strategies to involve more families, etc. Pay particular attention to your planning process. Therefore, you might consider developing a one-year goal and three-year outline of activities for the team (Epstein's forms available upon request). You might also consider answering these questions (with parent input) to guide your process: What forms of parent participation in reading are desirable and feasible? What strategies can be employed to achieve them?

Study Group Activity # 12: Shared Responsibility. Obtain copies of reports, memos, newsletters, or other communications that are sent home from your school. Consider the following:

1. What language is used to communicate information to parents? Does it convey an open and inviting tone, or one-way information sharing?
2. What family roles and responsibilities are implied? Are roles for participation implicit, explicit, or absent?
3. What opportunities for family input or interaction are present?
4. How can the communication be changed to promote a shared responsibility and partnership for learning (see Appendix G)?

Study Group Activity # 13 : Understanding the Conflict Resolution Process. Conflict is natural. The degree to which successful outcomes happen depends on how conflict is managed. Watch the tape, which can be checked out from the instructor, *Parent-Teacher Conferences – Resolving Conflicts* by Dr. Marvin Fine. Discuss the conflict resolution process that is illustrated with elementary and secondary school examples. Create a structure or outline for your use, and share it with staff at the school.

Study Group Activity # 14: Reaching the Uninvolved. Read and discuss the column presented in Appendix H. Note that the column was written in 1990 and is specific to involving parents to help improve reading outcomes for students. Fourteen ideas are suggested. Identify and evaluate ideas that make sense for you to implement at your school. Also, what new ideas were generated as a result of your discussion? Share the ideas with the school staff.

Summary. The school-family partnership project at the University of Illinois at Chicago highlights three focal points for intervention: two-way, reciprocal, home-school communication;

parent involvement in children's learning at home; and parent participation at school (Patrikakou & Weissberg, 1999). They have developed seven ingredients to partnership building. They apply this "seven-P's philosophy" to the development of strategies and tools at specific schools:

- Partnership as a priority
- Planned effort
- Proactive and persistent communication
- Positive
- Personalized
- Practical suggestions
- Program monitoring

Much is written about family-school connections for children's learning. There are common themes. Whether the leadership team chooses the "seven-P" philosophy or the process delineated by the 4 As (approach, attitudes, atmosphere, actions) makes little difference. Rather, the leadership team needs to focus on a school wide reading goal that applies these themes persistently and consistently in a way that best fits their school context.

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Christenson, S.L., & Sheridan, S.M. (2001). *Schools and families: Creating essential connections for learning*. New York: Guildford Press.

This practical volume is designed to help school practitioners and educators build positive connections with families and enhance student learning. The book describes four critical process variables that underlie strong partnerships: approach, attitudes, atmosphere, and actions; and provides a useful self-assessment inventory to guide practitioners in evaluating these variables in their own programs and schools. In particular, key pathways by which professionals and parents can develop common goals for learning and behavior, a shared sense of accountability, better communication, and a willingness to listen and value different perspectives in the design of educational programs are emphasized.

Comer, J. P., Haynes, N. M., Joyner, E. T., & Ben-Avie, M. (1996). *Rallying the whole village: The Comer process for reforming education*. New York: Teachers College Press.

This inspiring, practical book describes the highly successful School Development Program (SDP) developed by Comer and initiated in the New Haven, Conn., school district in 1968. Since its initiation, the SDP has been implemented in more than 700 schools and has resulted in improved achievement of its students. The book describes three principles that guide the SDP: consensus, collaboration, and no-fault. The program involves three teams: the Parent Team, School Planning and Management Team, and Student and Staff Support Team, which carry out three operations: Comprehensive School Plan, Staff Development, and Assessment and Modification. The goal of SDP is described as child and adolescent growth along six developmental pathways: physical, psychological, language, ethical, cognitive, and social.

Epstein, J.L. (2001). *School, family, and community partnerships: Preparing educators and improving schools*. Boulder, CO: Westview.

This comprehensive volume provides educators with a theoretically and research based framework for conceptualizing, planning, and implementing programs for school and family partnerships. The volume includes a review of the research on the implementation and effects of partnerships, outlines six types of involvement for creating partnerships, and provides examples of specific practices to use in elementary, middle, and high schools. It addresses how teachers and administrators can prepare themselves to create positive relationships and productive partnerships with families, and is designed as a main or supplemental text for use in college courses.

Hoover-Dempsey, K. V., & Sandler, H. M. (1997). Why do parents become involved in their children's education? *Review of Educational Research*, 67(1), 3–42.

Based on psychological theory and research, this insightful review highlights three constructs proposed as central for understanding why parents become involved in their children's education. Issues related to how parents perceive and construct their roles as parents, parental self-efficacy, and involvement messages from the school offer implications for both researchers and practitioners interested in enhancing family involvement.

Liontos, L. B. (1992). *At-risk families and schools: Becoming partners* (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. EA 023 283). Eugene, OR: ERIC.

This 150-page manual is an excellent, readable synthesis of theory, research, and specific programs about home-school collaboration for at-risk populations. Topics include communication, home as an educative environment, school readiness, home learning, and decision making. Particular emphasis is placed on early intervention, dropout prevention, and supporting and strengthening families. Elements of successful programs and information on reaching families are detailed.

National P. T. A. (2000). *Building successful partnerships: A guide for developing parent and family involvement programs*. Bloomington, IN: National Educational Service.

The six National Standards for Parent/Family Involvement Programs (Communicating, Parenting, Student Learning, Volunteering, School Decision Making and Advocacy, and Collaborating with the Community) provide the framework for this informative, useful book, of interest to anyone designing and evaluating parent involvement programs. Other resources include strategies for overcoming barriers and developing action teams, and reproducible position statements, surveys, forms, and worksheets helpful for developing family involvement programs.

Appendices

Appendix A: Inventory for Creating School-Family Connections

Appendix B: Sample Practices for Epstein's Six Types of Partnership Activities

Appendix C: Examples of School and Family Co-roles

Appendix D: Characteristics and Benefits of Collaborative Relationships

Appendix E: Practices that Promote Schools as Welcoming Climates

Appendix F: Communicating a "Win-Win" Attitude

Appendix G: Building Shared Responsibility for Educational Outcomes

Appendix H: Reaching the Uninvolved: How to

Appendix A

Inventory for Creating School–Family Connections

The goal of creating constructive family–school relationships is to engage students as learners. Family and school—out-of and in-school influences—provide different but complementary opportunities for children to learn. Ideally, schools and families interact as partners to achieve the goal of enhancing students’ learning and development (i.e., members of a school community that work together to achieve a common mission).

The “four A’s” provide a heuristic aid to conceptualize the key elements or conditions that enhance productive school–family relationships: approach, attitude, atmosphere, and actions. Various indicators for each of the four A’s are listed. Each indicator can be considered an objective that contributes to the overall goal of creating constructive school–family connections for children’s learning. This inventory was designed to provide a structure for educators, parents, and other individuals in the school community as they dialogue about ways to promote positive connections for children’s learning in their school context. Respondents are asked to judge the degree to which each objective stated below has been accomplished in their school community.

The following 5-point scale may be useful for sharing perspectives within school and across family and school environments:

- 1: Not at all/never
- 2: In some situations/infrequently
- 3: Variable/sometimes but not usually
- 4: In most situations/usually
5. Completely/always

APPROACH: The framework for interaction with parents

To what extent are the following conditions present in our school community?

1. Mutually shared goals across home and school for children’s learning.

1 2 3 4 5

2. Belief that parental involvement in school is paramount.

1 2 3 4 5

3. Belief that working together as partners will benefit the child’s learning and development, with mutually supported roles and actions to achieve this goal.

1 2 3 4 5

4. Recognition of the value of both in- and out-of-school learning opportunities for children’s learning and school progress.

1 2 3 4 5

5. Recognition that the nature and quality of the family–school relationship influence (positively or negatively) children’s school performance.

1 2 3 4 5

6. Expectation that families will be involved, and recognition that such involvement can mean different things to different families.

1 2 3 4 5

7. Expectation that teachers and school personnel will seek ways to invite parents to share in the educational process for their children, recognizing that this may “look different” to different families.

1 2 3 4 5

8. Presence of a mission statement that promotes the importance and expectation of school–family connections for children’s learning.

1 2 3 4 5

ATTITUDES: The values and perceptions held about family-school relationships

To what extent are the following conditions present in our school community?

1. Attempts to understand the needs, ideas, opinions, and perspectives of families and educators.

1 2 3 4 5

2. A nonblaming, no-fault problem-solving stance in interactions with families.

1 2 3 4 5

3. Willingness to share perspectives across home and school.

1 2 3 4 5

4. Perception of family involvement as essential (i.e., bringing a critical element to the team that is otherwise unavailable) rather than simply desirable.

1 2 3 4 5

5. A positive attitude that focuses on school, family, and child strengths, rather than only on problems or deficits.

1 2 3 4 5

6. Willingness to co-construct the whole picture about children by discussing, exploring, and understanding different perspectives.

1 2 3 4 5

7. Willingness to listen to and respond to concerns across home and school—viewing different perspectives as a way to better understand students’ needs, and viewing parents’ and educators’ concerns as a way to offer mutual support.

1 2 3 4 5

8. Mutual respect across home and school (i.e., respect for family members by school personnel, and respect for school personnel by family members).

1 2 3 4 5

9. Understanding that barriers for positive family–school relationships (i.e., constraints of each system) exist for parents and educators.

1 2 3 4 5

ATMOSPHERE: The climate in schools for families and educators

To what extent are the following conditions present in our school community?

1. Recognition of the value, and active solicitation, of family input regarding important decisions about their child.

1 2 3 4 5

2. Use of family and school input to promote positive outcomes for students.

1 2 3 4 5

3. A welcoming, respectful, inclusive, positive, supportive climate and atmosphere for *all* children and families.

1 2 3 4 5

4. A variety of communication strategies to reach all parents in a manner that is sensitive or responsive to family background (e.g., language, skills, knowledge level), easy to understand, and “jargon-free.”

1 2 3 4 5

5. A variety of communication strategies to share information and/or monitor children’s performance.

1 2 3 4 5

6. Parental and school trust in each other (including motives, objectives, and communications).

1 2 3 4 5

7. Mechanisms for listening to and responding to concerns across home and school.

1 2 3 4 5

8. Meaningful ways and flexible options for parents and students to be involved.

1 2 3 4 5

9. Opportunities for parents and school personnel to learn from one another (e.g., cross-cultural communication opportunities).

1 2 3 4 5

ACTIONS: Strategies for building shared responsibility

To what extent are the following conditions present in our school community?

1. Information is provided to families about school policies and practices, parents' and students' rights vis-à-vis education, and ways to foster students' engagement with learning.

1 2 3 4 5

2. Opportunities or mechanisms are provided for home and school to plan jointly and collaborate to resolve a shared concern or to improve learning experiences for students.

1 2 3 4 5

3. A process exists for creating mutually supportive roles for families and educators.

1 2 3 4 5

4. Supports and resources exist for creating and maintaining partnerships.

1 2 3 4 5

5. Policies and practices support a coordinated, collaborative approach (i.e., shared responsibility) for home and school.

1 2 3 4 5

6. Parents and school personnel (i.e., partners) routinely review the availability, accessibility, and flexibility of family–school roles and responsibilities for fostering children's/adolescents' learning and school engagement.

1 2 3 4 5

Note. From *Schools and Families: Creating Essential Connections for Learning* by Sandra L. Christenson and Susan M. Sheridan. Copyright 2001 by The Guilford Press.

Appendix B

Sample Practices for Epstein's Six Types of Involvement

Parenting:

- Offer information on child development at each age and grade (e.g., workshops, videos, books, tip sheets, computerized messages, bulletin board).
- Explain the relationship between home influences and school performance.
- Establish a lending library for parent education materials.
- Provide parents with information on curricular changes, contents of school records, how to monitor student progress, etc.
- Develop family support programs, parent education offerings responsive to family preferences, and Café Parent (e.g., parent center).
- Provide home visits at critical transition points (e.g., elementary to middle school) to establish a personal contact, provide information, and address parental questions.
- Develop a media blitz to publicize ways parents support student learning (e.g., “Did you know?” column in a school newsletter or local newspaper).
- Include tips on how parents can help their children succeed in school with their paychecks.

Communicating:

- Offer varied and flexible schedules for appointments (in person or phone).
- Establish a “fool-proof” contact system between home and school.
- Set the stage for positive communication by getting to know each other (e.g., meet and greet events, doughnuts for dads).
- Hold an individual interview and joint assessment of the child when first attending the school.
- Hold regular drop-in sessions for parents and office hours.
- Create parent-teacher-student partnership agreements to specify roles and responsibilities.
- Reframe conferences as opportunities for information sharing and problem solving.
- Keep parents in the planning loop by sharing school expectations, discipline policies, course syllabi and homework guidelines; ask for parents’ comments.
- Offer back-to-school nights throughout the year to sustain contact between families and educators.

Volunteering:

- Survey parents to assess their skills and talents, interests, and needs, and use the results to establish a volunteer program.
- Expect parents to volunteer and offer many options. Parents can complete a *Call Me Once Volunteer Card*, which commits the parent to serve only once a year unless permission to be called again is granted.

- Appreciate parents as experts, incorporating into the curriculum the skills from adults in the community.
- Include noncustodial parents on field trips, in special programs, and in school activities.
- Establish Adopt-a-School, a parent-coordinated effort that arranges for businesses to provide funds and services to the school.
- Create volunteer opportunities that go beyond traditional tasks such as Permanent Guest Teachers, who because of their qualifications “sub” to enable teachers to have time to meet to plan collaborative lessons, meet with students individually, or contact families.

Learning at Home:

- Provide interactive homework activities to increase parent-child communication about schoolwork.
- Send school-home activity packets to parents.
- Provide information on homework policies and how to monitor student performance and progress.
- Sponsor a “Parents make a Difference” evening where parents receive an overview of what students will be learning, how they will be assessed, what parents can expect, and how they can assist and make a difference.
- Establish a homework hotline.
- Use home-school assignment books to facilitate communication about ways to encourage learning for children and youth.
- Provide parents with resources, (e.g., *Megaskills* by Rich, 1988) about how to assist their children’s learning.

Decision Making:

- Create parent leaders. Use lay leaders (e.g., parents leading groups).
- Provide training for parents and other advisory council members to help them gain knowledge about educational issues and how to work effectively with schools.
- Ensure that parents’ voices are heard on school decisions (e.g., grade level family representatives on school councils and school improvement teams).
- Develop a family-school team to design ways to address issues that require parent-school input and cooperation for a successful outcome.
- Conduct parent focus groups to increase understanding of critical issues and necessary resources (e.g., improving student success on required tests).

Collaborating with the Community:

- Furnish local employers with information sheets about the school and parenting/parent involvement ideas.
- Sponsor an annual Give Back Day where students go into the community to perform needed work or services.

- Participate in school-linked and coordinated school health efforts (e.g., expanded school health services).
- Work with local churches to sponsor Education Sunday, a workshop to help parents share ideas for providing academic and motivational support to students.
- Develop after school homework/recreational programs.
- Provide information on community resources to address parents concerns.

Appendix C

Examples of School and Family Co-roles

School and Family as Co-communicators:

- School-wide use of assignment books or homework journals paired with family understanding of procedures
- Monthly progress and growth reports with sign-off sheets
- Send parent-teacher grams
- In the school-family newsletter, provide both family and teacher strategies for addressing student concerns
- Provide Our Turn/Your Turn or Our Half/Your Half columns in newsletters
- Install parent-teacher homework hotlines for assignments
- Share home learning ideas in the school or classroom newsletter
- Communicate clearly and frequently academic and behavior expectations that were developed by educators, parents, and community members
- Hold beginning of the year parent-teacher-student conferences to set academic goals and expectations and develop learning plans to enhance student support
- Display academic work throughout the school and community
- Provide grade or course level curriculum guides
- Publicize academic awards, honors and test results in school and community newspapers
- Provide forums for two-way communication to address educators' and families' concerns/questions/ideas
- Provide frequent positive feedback to parents and teachers when children are behaving appropriately or showing improved academic progress
- Develop a be on the "same page" philosophy by sharing wishes and worries about a child

School and Family as Co-supporters:

- Develop a computer home-lending program
- Organize an after school homework center staffed by teachers and parents
- Organize family field trips to cultural places and events
- Explore how support activities such as fund raisers, socials, carnivals, etc. reinforce the school's academic focus
- Develop an education hotline to address parent concerns that impact their children's education (e. g., attendance policies, graduation standards, special education, enrollment options, alternative schools, discipline and school safety, early childhood education)
- Invite families into the classroom and visit them at home
- Link families with community resources in times of need
- Provide extended day-care services with enrichment activities
- Develop parent/community volunteer program

- Organize student success teams composed of educators, community resource people, and parents to assist students who need additional help and resources to achieve success
- Organize adult education opportunities on school campus which help to meet parent needs and raise expectations
- Provide multiple opportunities for parents to be involved, especially in leadership roles which support the school
- Invite and encourage adult volunteers to organize after-school programs that will provide enriched, safe learning opportunities for students
- Organize campus and community clean-ups
- Allow school facilities to be used by community service groups
- Establish a parent/family center where parents can meet, socialize, organize, and learn together
- Campaign for the positive passage of school referendums

School and Family as Co-learners:

- Encourage classroom visitations and observations
- Host more frequent curriculum nights
- Sponsor home reading programs
- Provide parents with home learning materials (e.g., checkout system for learning packets)
- Link parent or family workshops to the curriculum
- Conduct home visits to acquaint parents with the school's mission and curriculum, and to suggest home learning strategies
- Organize academic performances which allow students to demonstrate what they are learning at school
- Hold an interactive forum to discuss graduation standards, the assessment and testing process, and how parents can support the standards being taught at school.
- Develop parent leaders by offering leadership development opportunities
- Provide workshops on topics determined by parents as important
- Provide several back-to-school nights at different times; take attendance and follow-up with non-attendees so that all families have information about school policies and procedures
- Provide relevant staff development, including effective communication with parents, designing effective homework and home learning activities, ways to involve parents in classroom instruction, and attributes and strengths of the family

School and Family as Co-teachers:

- Provide an activity sheet on time management
- Publish newsletter articles on how parents can keep student records and monitor progress
- Involve parents as teachers and experts in the classroom to share their talents and support the curriculum
- Assign interactive homework and or provide guidelines on how parents can help complete the homework

School and Family as Co-decision-makers:

- Involve parents and students in goal setting conferences
- Involve the school council in reviewing monitoring procedures, reporting of pupil progress, and conducting curriculum reviews
- Create a family-school team to address mutual concerns
- Involve the PTSA in planning ways to extend and enhance learning opportunities for students
- Form an alliance with community resources to extend learning opportunities
- Involve parents and community in developing the school's mission and goals and in setting and reviewing school policies and practices
- Form advisory committees to support each academic area or grade level
- Establish school committees which give parents and teachers an opportunity to work together on important school issues
- Create time for parents and teachers to discuss goals and expectations for student performance

Note: Examples of activities based on the categories of family-school roles by Moles (1993a).

Appendix D

Characteristics and Benefits of Collaborative Home-School Relationships

Characteristics

- Maintenance of a positive home-school relationship is a priority.
 - All parties believe that the expenditure of time and energy necessary to maintain the relationship is worthy.
 - Personal needs and goals are put aside to allow the needs and goals of the group to take precedence.
- Relationships are balanced:
 - Each member has generally equal opportunity in decision-making, but decisions are made on more than what is most “acceptable.”
 - The status of parents and teachers is complementary, recognizing the benefits of unique contributions of parents and educators that are not necessarily identical or “equal.”
- Relationships are cooperative and interdependent:
 - Families and schools share in the ownership for identifying, addressing, and solving problems.
 - Goals are determined in a mutually beneficial way.
 - There is joint responsibility for the child’s success, and for the establishment and maintenance of a trusting relationship.
- The relationship occurs in a context with the student at center:
 - Main attention is afforded to the benefits and outcomes to students.
 - Approaches are developed based on the specific needs and contexts within which relationships are formed.
 - Family-based services and programs are useful only in the extent to which they are responsive to needs within a particular context (i.e., they are contextualized).
- Actions between homes and schools are flexible, responsive, and proactive:
 - The manner in which home-school relationships are defined and actions developed vary depending on the unique context and situation.
 - Family members and educators will be involved in very different ways depending on the nature of the contact, the needs presented, the goals for the student and family, the resources available, and a host of other relevant factors.
- Differences in viewpoints and perspectives are seen as a strength, not a hindrance:
 - The respective vantage points of family members and educators enhance the understanding of a child and his/her situation.
 - The unique knowledge, resources, talents, and expertise that parents and educators bring to a situation enhance the potential outcomes for students.
- There is a commitment to cultural diversity:
 - Services are delivered in a way that is respectful of the cultural values and traditions that families and educators bring with them.

- Services that are sensitive to important cultures and traditions of families and schools are most likely to be effective.
- There is an emphasis on outcomes and goal attainment:
 - Goals are clearly specified, and progress toward goals is closely monitored through data-based decision-making processes.
 - Goals and objectives are outcome-based, and include problem resolution or management, prevention, and development of skills and competencies.

Benefits

- Enhanced communication and coordination among family members and educational personnel.
- Continuity in programs and approaches across home and school contexts.
- Shared ownership and commitment to educational goals.
- Increased understanding and conceptualization of the complexities of a child and his/her situation.
- Pooling of resources across home and school increases the:
 - range and quality of solutions
 - diversity in expertise and resources
 - integrity of educational/reading programs

Note: From Christenson & Sheridan (2001).

Appendix E

Practices that Promote Schools as Welcoming Communities

At-School Efforts:

- Develop a clear, welcoming parent involvement policy, publish it for all to see, and post it in an obvious location in the school.
- Display welcome signs in various languages.
- Ensure the school office is friendly and open.
- Organize the school so each child is known well by at least one person.
- Provide a full-time parent contact person responsible for connecting parents and educators.
- Post a school map to help visitors find their way around the school building.
- Arrange flowers, murals, children's pictures, and photographs in the main hallways.
- Consider a "family center" or parent room to allow family members to meet formally or informally with each other.
- Have available toys for young children to encourage parents with toddlers and infants to attend school functions.
- Post a welcome sign at the front door or in the school's entrance corridor.
- Arrange for translators for family members who do not speak English.

Family Outreach Efforts:

- Make at least one complimentary phone call to a parent each day.
- Sponsor a regular (e.g., monthly) parents' luncheon for informal social interactions.
- Consider special events for fathers, such as "Significant Male Day" or "Doughnuts for Dad."
- Ask a parent or grandparent to greet other parents at drop-off and pick-up times.
- Develop a friendly and inviting greeting for secretaries.
- Smile.
- Celebrate student successes.
- Invite parents to visit the school or classrooms.
- Use an "open school" policy or designate times when staff are available to talk.
- Host social events and multicultural celebrations.
- Make a home visit to welcome parents, invite them to visit the school, or provide a book as a friendly gesture.
- Ask parents about their needs and provide necessary services.
- Sponsor parent-to-parent communications and events.

From: Christenson & Sheridan (2001).

Appendix F

Communicating a Win-Win – “Can-Do” Attitude

Can't

We have never done it before

We don't have the resources.

We already tried it.

It's a waste of time.

We don't have the expertise.

It'll never fly.

It can't be done.

No one communicates.

Can Do

We have the chance to be first.

Necessity is the mother of invention.

We learned from the experience.

Think of the possibilities.

We'll network with those who do.

We'll never know until we try.

It'll be a challenge.

Let's open the channels.

Appendix G

Building Shared Responsibility for Educational Outcomes

Orientation/Back to School Night

Traditional: Parents are welcomed by the principal and follow their child's school schedule. The degree to which parents hear about school/teacher expectations and policies (e.g., homework, discipline) varies by school and teacher.

Partnership: Parents receive an invitation to the orientation nights, which are offered at multiple times to accommodate parents' schedules. School policies are explained and a handbook and school calendar are distributed to parents. Attendance is taken and there is follow-up (phone calls or home visit) for nonattendees. Several meetings are scheduled to receive parent input on the policies and to discuss parents' and educators' roles and responsibilities.

Another approach is for teachers to welcome parents and students to the classroom. Teachers articulate their goals for this to be the students' best year; they request parents and students to share their goals. Teachers summarize by noting the goals for which there is consensus, and reinforcing the idea if home and school work together students will do better. Arrangements are made for how to contact each other (Weiss & Edwards, 1992).

Workshops

Traditional: Schools offer workshops for parents to learn about school- or parent-determined topics.

Partnership: Topics for workshops that require an "institutional" and parent perspective are offered. Both parents and educators, as co-learners and co-teachers, attend. An educator and a parent organize and facilitate the workshops. Sample topics include: homework, improving IEP conferences, improving parent-teacher conferences, communication (e.g., maintaining a nonadversarial approach), test standards, etc.

Good News Phone Calls

Traditional: Teachers make positive phone calls to parents at work or at home. If secondary teachers make 2 phone calls per day (40 per month), they would have made 360 phone calls in one academic year.

Partnership: Phone calls are alternated between school and family. Teachers make the first couple positive phone calls. They request parents to call next with their good news observations.

Newsletters

Traditional: The school sends the newsletter to parents. School personnel, whether the principal or teachers, have taken the responsibility for the writing of the newsletter, which contains important information about child/adolescent development and school programs and policies.

Partnership: On the first of the month the teacher writes the letter, and on the fifteenth of the month, the parent is given a blank newsletter to complete. Or the newsletter is written by volunteer parents working with teachers or students. Or the newsletter reinforces a partnership orientation, such as Our Turn and Your Turn columns.

Communication System

Traditional: Most communication flows from the school to the home (principal's hour) and is in print. Home-school assignment sheets are used for individual students.

Partnership: Written communication says: we want to be partners, parent input and involvement is critical to children's educational achievement, and if there is a concern, we will work together to find a solution. Also, communication builds in opportunities for dialogue. For example, the principal schedules "office" hours for discussion. The descriptor for this commonly used structure is changed to Principal-Parent Hour to reflect the partnership.

Home-school assignment books, diaries, journal notebooks are used on a daily basis to set clear expectations for work to be completed. Teachers allow time before the end of the school day to allow students to organize their responsibilities. Students write in assignments (may copy from the overhead) and may use a buddy for checking accuracy. Parents, teachers, and students rate student behavior and academics weekly. The system is described at back to school nights; nonattendeess receive a personal contact.

Contract/Partnership Agreements

Traditional: Home-school contracts used for individual students.

Partnership: Home-school-student contracts used school-wide. These can be linked to ILP's (individual learning plans) and IEP's (individual education plans), where specific responsibilities for the school, family and student to achieve the goals are documented.

Monitoring Student Progress

Traditional: Schools, particularly teachers, assume the total responsibility for informing parents about student progress (e.g., report cards, personal contact-phones, home notes).

Partnership: Monitoring student progress is shared with parents. Parents are asked to keep educational records for their children; these can be shared with the child's teacher(s)

the following year. (See K-12 examples of an educational file developed by Johnson and Johnson, 1994-95). Also a system can be established whereby parents request specific information about the student's progress (i.e., parent calls 9th grade teacher to ask about performance in algebra class). Conferences with parents are held early (i.e., within first half of the quarter) for the purpose of developing two way-communication about student progress. Suggestions for improving class grades/learning the material are available.

Volunteers

Traditional: Schools distribute a list of volunteer activities to parents. The list specifies the needs of schools, and indicates that parent involvement in this capacity is desirable.

Partnership: A list is distributed to parents. However, the wording emphasizes that parents are essential, and the list introduced in a way that underscores involvement and participation are expected, but responsive to the parents' choices. For example:

At _____ School, we believe that teachers and parents are both needed to help students achieve their very best performance in school. This is an invitation to share your abilities and time with your child and /or other children at school. Your suggestions and expertise are needed.

These volunteer positions include one-time commitments:

These volunteer positions include on-going, longer-term opportunities to be involved in helping students succeed/improve their school progress:

In what way do you plan to be involved? (Feel free to suggest another way)

We know when parents are involved in their children's learning, they (list benefits for student learning). Involvement can include activities at school and at home. Slips are obtained from all parents by making personal contact with those who do not return the slips by the designated time. A parent often coordinates this activity.

Conferencing

Traditional: One-way communication, usually focusing on teacher evaluation of child performance, resulting in sole responsibility being placed on teachers.

Partnership: The use of early (within first month of school) goal setting and information sharing conferences provides an opportunity to build the parent-teacher relationship. Parents are given sample questions to ask of and answer for the teacher. Students are encouraged to attend the conferences so everyone is "singing from the same sheet of music." A system for on-going communication is established. Student-led conferences pair well with this format.

Appendix H

Involving the Uninvolved: How to

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The following is from the column, Working with Parents, in the *The Reading Teacher* (February, 1990).

“It’s a sobering fact that given the best of intentions and the variety of offerings, some parents will choose not to participate in the school’s reading program. We think that lack of interest or desire are typical reasons why some parents choose not to get involved in our curricula. Unfortunately, such an attitude becomes self-defeating in the long run: If we believe in the permanence of a group of parents that contribute neither to the reading welfare of their youngsters nor to the reading welfare of the school, then we may choose not to expend the effort necessary to involve those parents. Thus we have established a self-fulfilling prophecy that is difficult to undo.

Since the modern family has a host of concerns and problems with which to deal on a daily basis, it behooves us to explore all the possibilities for helping every family contribute to individual and community excellence in reading. The Home and School Institute in Washington, DC refers to this as a “nondeficit” policy ---that is, we should be more concerned with what the family *has*, then with what it *doesn’t* have. This policy can provide insight into parent participation programs as well. For example, we shouldn’t spend a great deal of time worrying about why some families are not involved in our reading programs; rather we should devote time to methods and procedures for helping parents become informed, stay informed, and become functioning members of the entire reading curriculum.

In surveying successful parent involvement efforts developed by elementary schools, several procedures for reaching nonparticipating parents have been used. The ideas, some of which follow, are not the only suggestions possible; however, they were part of many schools’ successful parent involvement efforts within and beyond the reading curriculum. We offer them here as examples of successful outreach efforts that can encourage parents who have traditionally not been a part of the local reading game plan.

- Flood parents with lots of written and visual information over an extended period of time. One shot publicity campaigns are not sufficient to provide parents with the information they need to become involved and stay involved in the reading program.

- Make parent participation a school wide effort. Don't relegate it to a single classroom, grade level, or something that emanates solely from the principal's office. It must be a concern of the entire school community.
- Be sure to provide for a healthy dose of recognition (e.g., prizes, awards, certificates) for both parents and students. It's just human nature that we all want to be recognized for our efforts --- both large and small. Be sure all parents are commended frequently for their efforts in the reading program.
- Involve students wholeheartedly in recruiting parents. Have students write special invitations or design special awards to be sent to their own parents or others throughout the classroom and school community.
- Encourage participatory projects that involve the entire family. One factor that continually surfaces in effective outreach efforts is the fact that parents, siblings, relatives, *and* pupils are involved together in many aspects of a reading program. The family atmosphere enhances and guarantees a successful project.
- At the same time, don't focus all of your outreach efforts on school parents. Recruit other community members and solicit community support as well. Even if your reading program is small and clientele limited, you can engender very positive feelings throughout the school and beyond when others are kept informed of school functions and are provided opportunities to become members of the classroom reading family.
- Make your classroom and school a very comfortable place; the more comfortable it is, the more you will be able to get the support you desire. For many people, school appears to be a very formal operation, thus they may be hesitant to get involved. Open-door policies, a liberal visitation plan, and a willingness to meet on parents' terms can do a great deal to foster the attitudes and atmosphere you desire. Also, consider moving beyond the safety of the classroom or school. Plan to meet parents in their homes, at the shopping mall, or in other community locations. Some parents who are reluctant to visit schools would be more comfortable in a neutral site.
- Use the telephone as an instrument of good news. Parents often see the telephone as something to convey bad news. There's hardly a parent who hasn't received a phone call about a missed assignment, a poor test score, or some inappropriate behavior. Yet the telephone should be used frequently by teachers as a means to convey good news and information. Occasional phone calls about some exciting happening in the reading program can be a marvelous way to convey a spirit of optimism and inclusion to families.
- Take time to find out why parents who are not involved choose to distance themselves from the program. Plan a few phone calls or visits to the homes of these absentee parents and talk over some reasons why they may not be supporting your efforts. Approach these talks with an open and nonjudgmental attitude – your goal is

to discover reasons for nonsupport, not to condemn. You may be surprised to learn that uninvolved parents have ample time but lack sufficient information.

- In scheduling any participatory activities, consider a host of potential plans. Provide a number of scheduling options for parents including mornings, afternoons, evenings, weekends, weekdays, and the like. You should be ready to schedule involvement activities at the convenience of parents, not necessarily at the convenience of your program.
- Consider establishing a parent hotline offering parents an opportunity to contact each other about mutual concerns or just relay information about upcoming events in the reading program. Many successful parent projects have used a telephone-tree system in order to keep parents up to date and informed throughout the year.
- Use community members (e.g., mayor, city council members, and business [people]) to endorse your reading program just as advertising uses the testimony of popular TV personalities or sports heroes to promote products. Also, have parents submit testimonials or comments to be used in newsletters, brochures, and other printed materials sent home by your class or school.
- Whenever possible, videotape some of your special programs and make these tapes available to parents. Busy schedules predominate in today's families and parents don't always have the time to attend all classroom and school functions. Consider developing your own series of parent involvement instructional tapes (look at the natural actors you have in your class) for distribution throughout the community.
- Whenever you hold a special event consider offering special services that encourage parent attendance. These services might include babysitting, driving, or escort services prior to or during the actual program. These extras let parents know that you are generally concerned about having them attend and are making an honest effort to reach out and get them involved" (p. 424-425).