

RUNNING HEAD: Home-to-School

The Importance of the Home-School Connection

By: Courtney Foley

Michigan State University

### **The Parent – Teacher Relationship**

At some point, every teacher will interact with a student's parent(s), and every parent will interact with their child's teacher(s). This occurrence can be either positive or negative. Each party can come away feeling like a valuable team member advocating for the best education for a child or an unknowledgeable outsider. Many studies have shown that a close working relationship between teacher and student can have a positive effect on a student's level of success throughout her/his school career. Therefore, it is imperative to understand how this relationship can be built and the reasons for its importance.

A parent is a child's first and most important teacher. Any teacher of a school age child should feel like a partner in the education of the student's in her/his classroom. In the past, this relationship has not been fostered. Each party felt intimidated when discussing a child's achievements or lack thereof. Now, with the increasing diversity of students, with regards to abilities, disabilities, language, and culture, teachers need more support than ever. Teachers and parents both need to communicate and work together in order to become partners in educating today's children.

### **The Definition of Home-to-School Connection**

A home-to-school connection is defined as a positive, working relationship established between a child's teacher and his/her caregiver (i.e. parents). This connection between home and school bridges the two most important places in a child's world. There are many ways in which this relationship can be established and maintained. Teachers can initiate communication before the first day of school by sending welcome letters to students with expectations for the year, as well as information about class schedules, calling or visiting families to initiate introductions,

and plan and hold school open houses or back-to-school nights (Weinstein & Mignano, 1997).

This initial meeting serves to introduce the teacher to the student, as well as, the student (and the student's family) to the teacher. It is at this time that teachers can communicate the expectations for the year and parents can communicate valuable personal, familial, and cultural information about the child.

Each technique or combination of techniques described above will suffice as the beginning of a positive parent-teacher relationship. To maintain this relationship, both parents and teachers are required to put forth effort throughout the school year. Parents should promptly communicate any changes in a child's life, such as, illness, death in the family, a move, or other important event. Teachers should continue to keep parents informed of what is taking place in the classroom with regards to lessons, special events, student achievement, and behavior.

### **The Research on Parental Involvement**

Traditionally the relationship between parents and teachers has been depicted as a somber discussion of student achievement or, more often, underachievement at the yearly parent-teacher conference. Because no prior relationship had been established, both parties are uncomfortable during the discussion, and no plans are put in place to help the low achieving student. To avoid this type of relationship which does not support student achievement, policies have been put in place to foster stronger connections between school and families for the United States in the Goals 2000 Initiative. These policies were created to help educators better understand the steps needed to reach the increasingly diverse families of their students, and to assist parents in gaining access to their child's education.

According to a study reported in the journal *Adolescence*, the need for parental involvement continues from the primary grades into middle and high school. “The consistent positive emotions that come from a sense of relatedness with significant others are associated with the development of social skills as well as a sense that the world is safe and predictable. Such a sense of security is crucial for exploration in identity formation.”(Sartor & Youniss, 2002). It is clear that the benefits of a strong parent-teacher relationship remain great throughout a child’s school career. Therefore it is important for all teachers to foster such a relationship, regardless of the age of their students.

The most recent estimates indicate that there are approximately 4.7 million students who meet the criteria for English-language learner designation in U.S. schools (Gambrell, Morrow, & Pressley, 2007). With the increasing number of ELLs in general education classrooms, parent-teacher relationships become even more critical. Understanding linguistic and cultural differences is important in developing educational strategies and learning plans for these learners. Also, continuing language learning in the home and with the family is essential in order for these students to acquire appropriate English language skills, as well as, maintain those of their native language(s).

While all involved in the education of children agree that a strong positive relationship between family and teacher is beneficial and conducive to student success, not all agree that appropriate policies to foster such a relationship have yet been put in place. Parent involvement, a national education goal mentioned in the Goals 2000 initiative, is essential in schools. The author of the book Rethinking Family-School Relations: A critique of parental involvement in schooling, the author challenges current parental involvement models. De Carvalho argues that these models disregard the diversity of today’s families and will create more inequality among

students. Current policies requiring parental involvement may be primarily written for middle class suburban families (de Carvalho, 2001). Encouraging involvement from only this type of family will be excluding many of the families present in today's classrooms. Therefore, while policies requiring schools to initiate parental involvement are a step in the right direction, there is much progress to be made in how the school-home connection is created and maintained in the future.

As stated, parental involvement, while imperative to student success, can not be required as a policy to cure low student achievement(deCarvalho, 2001). The home-to-school connection is, however, a way for both parents and teachers to gain insight on the reasons why underachievement may be taking place. And, thus, can serve as a jumping off point to raise student achievement levels.

### **The Implication of a Parent-Teacher Relationship**

It is well documented within educational research that students whose families are involved in a partnership with the school are more academically successful than those with no such school-family partnership. As teachers who strive to help each student succeed, fostering such relationships should be a top priority. Teachers should offer a variety of ways for parents to be involved in the classroom. The school-home connection takes place on various levels. Teachers are responsible for sharing what is taking place in the classroom and student progress. Schools are also responsible for offering training sessions for parents in order to inform parents of school policies and classroom curriculum. Parents are responsible for communicating cultural differences and important family information. Parents and teachers can also come together to share information not directly related to the student. Parents can serve as volunteers for various

school and classroom events. Teachers and schools can offer insight into current educational trends or changes in school policies. Connecting schools and parents in these ways creates an open relationship where caring adults are working together to help students succeed. With an increasing incident of special education labels, school violence, and other educational issues, educators need all the support they can get to achieve success with the diverse learners in their classrooms.

Also, as stated earlier, the cultural diversity of the students in today's classrooms is rapidly increasing. As this occurs, it becomes more and more difficult to relate to and understand each student's culture and family background. Creating a positive relationship with families bridges the cultural gap sometimes evident between a student (and that student's family) and teacher. This bridge can also prove beneficial to other students in the classroom by creating a more diverse learning atmosphere, which is more representative of today's society. This too is becoming an important part of today's classroom curriculum.

### **Conclusion**

National Education Goals 1 and 8 of the Goals 2000 Initiative require schools to create relationships with student caregivers. We are required to foster this relationship because it has proven to be a significant indicator of student achievement. The best predictor of parental involvement is what schools do to promote it (Dauber & Epstein, 1993). If the benefits of a strong home-school connection are understood, then clearly it is the responsibility of educators to initiate and promote this relationship. Parental involvement allows for insight on a student's behavioral and motivational issues that may hinder their achievement in the classroom. It gives students a sense of community and a strong support system from which to rely on in times of

adversary. Fostering a parent teacher alliance is what is right for our students and something that we must do as educators.

There are many reasons for implementing strategies to create a strong home to school connection for students in our classrooms. However, there is one that may often be overlooked. In this technological age, humans can go months without any form of actual human contact. It's important to teach students that this contact is still important. Children still need to learn how to create and maintain relationships with others who may be very different from themselves. What better way to do this than through a demonstration involving the two most important people in a child's life. Teacher-parent relationships can do much to instill the value of the human connection in today's children. If it takes a village to raise a child, then there we must begin communication between all the members of the community.

### **For More Information**

For more information on the importance of the home-to-school connection or for ideas for parents and teachers to foster this relationship, contact the following organizations:

#### **National Parent Teacher Association**

541 N Fairbanks Court  
Suite 1300  
Chicago, IL 60611-3396  
Phone: (312)670-6782  
Toll-Free: (800) 307-4PTA  
Fax: (312) 670-6783  
Website: <http://www.pta.org>

**National Coalition for Parent Involvement in Education (NCPIE)**

Sue Ferguson, Chair

1400 L Street NW, Suite 300

Washington DC 20005

phone 202-289-6790

fax 202-289-6791

[ferguson@ncpie.org](mailto:ferguson@ncpie.org)

Website: <http://www.ncpie.org>

**The Family Involvement Network of Educators (FINE) (@Harvard Family Research Project)**

3 Garden Street

Cambridge, MA 02138

Tel: 617-495-9108

Fax: 617-495-8594

Email: [hfrp@gse.harvard.edu](mailto:hfrp@gse.harvard.edu)

Website: <http://www.gse.harvard.edu/hfrp/projects/fine.html>

**PTO Today**

100 Stonewall Blvd, Suite 3

Wrentham, MA 02093

Phone: 800-644-3561

Fax: 508-384-6108

Website: <http://www.ptotoday.com>



**Partnership for Family Involvement in Education**

600 Independence Ave., S.W.

Washington, DC 20202-8173

(800) USA-LEARN or (202) 401-0091

Fax (202) 205-9133

E-mail: [Partner@ed.gov](mailto:Partner@ed.gov)

## References

### Books

- Dauber, S.L. & Epstein, J.L. (1993). Parent attitudes and practices of involvement in inner-city elementary and middle schools. In Chavkin (Ed.), *Families and schools in a pluralistic society*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press
- DeCarvalho, M. (2001). *Rethinking family-school relations: A critique of parental involvement in schooling*. Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum
- Gambrell, LB, Morrow LM, & Pressley, M. (Eds.). (2007). *Best practices in literacy instruction* (3<sup>rd</sup> ed.). New York: Guilford Press
- Mignano, Jr., AJ, & Weinstein, CS. (1997). *Elementary Classroom Management: Lessons from research and practice* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.). New York: McGraw-Hill Publishers

### Articles

- Ascher, C. (June, 1988). Improving the school-home connection for poor and minority urban students. *The Urban Review*, 20 (2), p 109-123.
- Sartor, CE & Youniss, J. (Summer 2002). The relationship between positive parental involvement and identity achievement during adolescence. *Adolescence*, 37 n146, p. 221-234.
- Zygmunt-Fillwalk, E. (Summer 2006). Encouraging success through family involvement. *Childhood Education*, 82 (4), p. 226F. 226F.

### Websites

- Family Matters (2007). Parent Guides; School Involvement. Retrieved July 1, 2007 from <http://www.scholastic.com/familymatters/parentguides/schoolinvolve/articles.htm>
- Nathan, J. (1996). Critical Issue: Supporting Ways Parents and Families Can Become Involved in Schools. Retrieved June 30, 2007 from <http://www.ncrel.org/sdrs/areas/issues/envrnmnt/famncomm/pa100.htm>
- Education World (2006). Parent Involvement in Schools. Retrieved July 7, 2007 from [http://www.education-world.com/a\\_special/parent\\_involvement.shtml](http://www.education-world.com/a_special/parent_involvement.shtml)