Partnering With Families and Your Community

Statistics change from year to year and/or study to study, but everyone agrees that greater family involvement concerning a child's education is essential to that student's success. When comparing lifetime earnings between a student who graduates from high school with one who does not, the difference can be more than $250,000. When a college education is factored in for a high school graduate, that amount can exceed $1 million. So, what can we as educators do to partner with families and our community to help them get involved in student learning?

First, we need to understand why many parents are currently not involved in their child's education. Overwhelmingly, time seems to be the biggest barrier. Often, parents are also unsure as to how they can help their child learn and may look to the teacher or school counselor for guidance. A cultural barrier such as limited English proficiency and/or a lack of education may also keep a parent from getting involved. And, for some it is the lack of resources such as access to libraries.

Next, we need to consider what families can reasonably do to build a better relationship with their children and their children's schools to ultimately help their children learn. Following are some suggested strategies that educators can share with parents:

- Read aloud to young children several times a week.
- Select television programming that the family can watch together.
- Talk with each other regularly to keep channel of communication open, and remember listening is a key component of good communication.
- Schedule a time when the family can sit down and have dinner together.
- Schedule time daily for homework and set aside parental time to find out what children are studying/doing in class.
- Monitor after school activities.
- Place importance on a good education and encourage children to do their best; offer support.
- Acknowledge accomplishments and offer praise for a job well done.
- Be a role model; set a positive example.

Note: Three factors that affect student learning and that parents have control over are student absenteeism, the amount of time spent in front of the TV, and the types of reading materials made available in the home.

Following are some strategies to help parents build a better relationship with schools:

- Participate in school activities such as parent teacher meetings, open houses, and career fairs.
- Learn about the curriculum that is being taught and class projects.
- Enroll your child in challenging courses throughout their education.
- Keep in touch with teachers and the school counselor concerning your child's progress/performance.
- Take advantage of community resources, including after school programs, mentoring/leadership activities, and/or local public library.

It is also important for educators to work closely with families to build a strong school-family partnership. Some strategies to help teachers, administrators, and parents improve the learning environment for students include:

- Work together to make the schools and neighborhoods safe so that students have a secure environment in which to learn.
- Reinforce student learning by showing relevance of coursework to ability to earn a living wage and be successful in the workplace.
- Expand opportunities for contact using evening and weekend hours for meeting and activities, and help coordinate transportation and childcare so more families can participate.
- Encourage parental input in school decisions.
- Use technology such as homework hotlines and electronic mail.
- Address language barriers with interpreters and bilingual staff.

And, finally, the whole community must come together and form a partnership with families and schools to ensure the best learning environment for students from early education through high school graduation. Following are some strategies that can be implemented by the community:

- Develop a plan to combat alcohol, drugs, and violence in and around schools and the neighborhood.
- Enlist community volunteers, including retired citizens to help out during the school day and at after school activities.
- Offer after-school and summer learning programs such as science and math clubs/academies and/or reading groups.
- Provide tutoring/mentoring programs for students at all ages.
- Provide parenting classes, including literacy and career training.
- Encourage parent and school involvement in community projects.
- Encourage employers to offer flexible leave that enables parents to attend school meetings and other school activities, including parenting and literacy training and volunteer work.

Adapted from Strong Families, Strong Schools: Building Community Partherships For Learning, U.S. Department of Education, 1994.