A Powerful Impact: The Importance of Engaging Parents, Families and Communities in improving Student Success

Essays by GEMS Education advisers and partners
About GEMS Education

Founded in 1959 GEMS Education seeks to put a quality education within reach of every child.

GEMS educates 130,000 students from over 150 nationalities across four continents. Our consultancy arm, GEMS Education Solutions works with governments to lift school performance and improve the standards and expertise of government schools across the globe. The Varkey GEMS Foundation aims to impact 100 underprivileged children for every child enrolled in a GEMS school. GEMS has offices in the United Kingdom, Switzerland, the United States of America, Singapore, India, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Kenya, Egypt and the United Arab Emirates.

The GEMS Parent Engagement Advisory Board

The GEMS Parent Engagement Advisory Board is made up of leading academics, educationalists, authors and researchers in the field of family engagement in learning and supports GEMS to stay at the forefront of best practice in this area of parental engagement.

Our prestigious board comprises Dr. Joyce Epstein, Ms. Anne Henderson, Dr. Bill Lucas, Dr. Karen Mapp and is supported by Peter Davies.

For further information about the work of the GEMS Parent Engagement Advisory Group, please contact Alice Cornish (alice.cornish@gemseducation.com).
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Dr. Bill Lucas is Professor of Learning at the University of Winchester, where he is Director of the Centre for Real-World Learning. Bill chairs the GEMS Parent Engagement Advisory Panel and is an international adviser to GEMS (for whom in 2010 he wrote *The Impact of Parent Engagement on Learner Success: A Digest of Research for Teachers and Parents*). He is Chair of the UK's Talent Foundation, a patron of Pegasus Theatre and a trustee of The English Project.

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Creator of one of the most widely used frameworks for school, parent and family partnership working in the world.

Dr. Epstein holds a Ph.D. in Sociology from Johns Hopkins University, is Director of the Center on School, Family, and Community Partnerships and the National Network of Partnership Schools (NNPS), Principal Research Scientist, and Research Professor of Sociology at Johns Hopkins University. Her current research focuses on how district and school leadership affects the quality of schools' programs of family and community involvement and results for students. In all of her work, she is interested in the connections of research, policy, and practice.

**Anne Henderson, Member (US)**

Anne Henderson is a prolific and widely respected researcher, adviser, and popular writer about effective parental engagement.

Her specialty is the relationship between families and schools, and its impact on students’ success in school and through life. Since 1981, she has steadily tracked research and effective practice on how engaging families can improve student achievement, especially in diverse and low-income communities. Over the past 25 years, Anne has written, by herself and with others, a small library of reader-friendly articles, reports, hand-outs, and books. Her best-selling book, *Beyond the Bake Sale: The Essential Guide to Family-School Partnerships* (The New Press, 2007) was written with Karen Mapp, Vivian Johnson, and Don Davies. Anne has also written the Evidence series, which reviews the research on the effects of parent and community engagement on student achievement. Anne’s most recent report, published by the National Education Association in 2011, is *Family-School-Community Partnerships 2.0: Collaborative Strategies to Advance Student Learning.*

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She is the author of *Making the Connection between Families and Schools,* published by the Harvard Education Letter (1997) and *Having Their Say: Parents Describe How and Why They Are Engaged in Their Children’s Learning* in the School Community Journal (2002). She also co-authored with Anne Henderson *A New Wave of Evidence: The Impact of School, Family and Community Connections on Student Achievement* (2002).

**Peter Davies, Consultant (UK, Ex Officio)**

Peter Davies is interim Director of the GEMS Global Parent Engagement Initiative. He is an international educator with a wealth of experience, including school leadership in a variety of settings and qualification and experience as an Inspector of Schools, internationally. He has consulted to the Office for Standards in Education in the UK, various state governments in the USA and the Knowledge and Human Development Agency in Dubai, to the Ministry of Education in Rwanda and to the Prime Minister’s Office in Kenya. He is also a trained psychodynamic counsellor and a member of The American Psychoanalytic Association.
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Persuasive research demonstrates the strong link between family participation in a child’s schooling and the child’s success – whether measured by attainment, attendance, character development, behaviour or graduation rates. The arguments are clear, and yet far too often parents – who unarguably know their children best – are left as a side thought in school improvement planning, participating in schools in an ad hoc manner, rather than being part of more systemic engagement initiatives.

At GEMS Education, we actively equip our teachers with the skills they need to forge effective partnerships with parents. If collaborative learning is to be achieved, then parents must feel respected and valued as partners in a welcoming and non-threatening setting. As part of our commitment to this important part of education reform, we have assembled a group of leading experts in parent, family and community engagement who challenge us to adopt best practice initiatives in our own global network of schools. They also support us to develop family engagement solutions for governments and third party clients.

The GEMS Parent Engagement Global Initiative stand by the following core principles:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>All children have the right to grow up in a nurturing and loving relationship with their parents and/or family, and to be nurtured as well by the wider community, including their school.</th>
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<td>2.</td>
<td>The school-family relationship is reciprocal. What happens at home has a profound impact on a child’s development just as schools can have a powerful influence on the home learning environment. In turn, parents and families can have a powerful and positive impact on school climate and quality. To meet their students’ unique needs, schools must understand and know their families, making it a core activity to reach out to welcome and engage them all.</td>
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<td>3.</td>
<td>The most critical factor in family engagement is the quality of the relationship between the parent and teacher. Parent and family engagement leads to improvement in students’ academic performance, as well as to a range of social and emotional benefits. The relationship is, of course, a journey from exploratory involvement to deeper collaboration for student success.</td>
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<td>4.</td>
<td>Parent engagement is central to school improvement and needs to be clearly linked to school improvement goals and tightly integrated into school improvement plans. It requires determined, collaborative leadership and capacity-building at all levels.</td>
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Engaging Parents in Schools
by Bill Lucas

In all cultures parents are, of course, a major influence on a child’s success in life. While the quality of schools and the nature of the child’s peer group matter significantly, it is from the home and the community that young people derive lasting impacts on their character, mindset and attainment. GEMS Education is at the forefront of developing parental engagement practices across the globe that will benefit all learners in its own schools and in the schools and educational administrations with which it works. It was precisely in recognition of the importance of engaging parents in education that the GEMS Parent Engagement Global Initiative was formed, bringing together some of the world’s thought leaders to advance our knowledge. We hope that individually and collectively we can help schools to move beyond mere involvement to active, sustained and rigorous parent and family engagement.

A curious lack of attention to parents by schools
We should not be surprised that parents have such an influential role in the education of their children. They are, after all, a child’s first teacher well before the formal world of education is encountered and some 75% and 85% of a child’s waking hours are spent outside the school classroom. It is worth remembering that the idea that teachers in schools are solely responsible for the education of children and teenagers is a relatively recent one. In the last two centuries, as schooling has gradually become compulsory for most people, the roles of teacher and parent have tended to grow apart as education has been professionalized.

Little more than a generation ago parents were still being left firmly outside the school gate. And even today they can sometimes find themselves metaphorically (and sometimes literally) being talked down to by well-meaning teachers who have not sufficient understanding or skill in facilitating the necessary home-school partnership.

So it is odd that today so much of the world’s current interest in improving the educational outcomes of students focuses on what goes on within schools rather than emphasizing the connections between schools and the families and communities of those they are teaching.

“GEMS Education is at the forefront of developing parental engagement practices across the globe that will benefit all learners in its own schools and in the schools and educational administrations with which it works across the world.”

The strength of the research evidence
It is not as if we lack impact data for the impact of engaging parents on outcomes for young people. We know, for example, that parents’ engagement in the educational development of their children is one of a small number of specific ways of improving student attainment. We have an increasingly sophisticated idea of what it is that schools can do to engage with parents to help children flourish both academically and socially and two authors in this selection, Joyce Epstein and Anne Henderson, have contributed significantly to our understanding. We know, too, some of the ways in which parents can help their child, for example, by having regular and meaningful conversation with them, by setting high aspirations and by demonstrating their own interest in and support of learning at home and at school.

References
2 In recent years there has been a shift in the choice of noun from parental ‘involvement’ to parental ‘engagement’. At GEMS we strongly prefer the greater commitment implied by engagement.
Signs of hope alongside variable implementation

In good schools and in well-organized educational systems all of this is changing for the better with the roles of parents, families and local communities being explicitly acknowledged and encouraged. While the role of parenting has been explicitly acknowledged in legislation such as No Child Left Behind Act (USA, 2001) and Every Child Matters (England, 2004), it is still patchily put into practice at school, district, state/local authority or national level.

Given that parents are bombarded by so many groups keen to sell them things, it is heartening to see that the percentage of parents who are at least ‘involved’ in their children’s school is rising steadily. But involvement alone is not enough.

As we learn more about what works, schools are also beginning to see the value of building in evaluation of all their programs, and governments are publishing guidance on effective strategies.

It is also encouraging to see how, across the world, parental engagement is being seen as a key part of the solution to specific issues such as:

• The under-achievement of children and families living in poverty
• Students with high needs whose progress could be improved
• Girls being supported to realize their full potential
• Boys underachieving in certain subjects
• Various cultural groups not historically well dealt with by schools, and
• The use of technology in rural or dispersed communities.

But parental engagement is more than a good idea to solve a particular problem. It is central to what schooling should be in the 21st century. Parents, families and communities have to be genuine partners with schools in ‘bringing up’ the neighborhood’s children. Developing, implementing and evaluating a strategy for implementing parental engagement is a core part of any leader’s role. We are under no illusions that this will require a major shift in culture and we commit ourselves at GEMS to supporting this major habit change ‘project’. It will not happen overnight but we believe that there are encouraging signs.

This collection of papers explores some aspects of parental engagement which we believe to be both important and timely. Our thought leaders:

• Argue for the central importance of parental engagement as a school improvement strategy
• Demonstrate how high needs students benefit hugely from certain kinds of parental engagement practices
• Question why teachers are so poorly prepared for engaging with parents and families.

We end with some reflections on how GEMS might encourage its own employees to act as ambassadors for the power of engaging parents in their children’s education. Our aspiration is to share what works in different countries and contexts to build a shared understanding of where we face common issues and have similar solutions and where we need to respect and learn from each other’s different experiences and expectations.

Bill Lucas is Professor of Learning at the University of Winchester, England, where he is Director of the Centre for Real-World Learning.

References

1 See http://www2.ed.gov/parents/academic/involve/nclbguide/parentsguide.pdf for the guide for parents which accompanied this legislation

See http://www.childtrends.org/?indicators=parental-involvement-in-schools
High-Impact Family Engagement: A Core Strategy for School Improvement

by Anne Henderson

Over thirty years have passed since the publication of A Nation at Risk (1981), the landmark report warning that ‘a rising tide of mediocrity’ in the U.S. education system imperils our international competitiveness and undermines the foundations of our democratic society. In the interim, Congress has overhauled the Elementary and Secondary Education Act three times, most notably in the ‘No Child Left Behind’ amendments of 2001, triggering a host of school improvement initiatives around the country.

The United States now has a standards-based system to hold states and local school districts accountable for raising test scores and reducing achievement gaps among groups of students. A whole school reform industry has developed, using data-based approaches that draw on the enormous assessment systems that the law has spawned. States are developing new systems of teacher evaluation that use gains in student performance as a leading criterion for judging teacher quality.

How are we doing?
The National Assessment of Educational Progress, the test administered by the U.S. Department of Education, shows that in 2011, just over a third of 4th and 8th graders in the U.S. are proficient in reading and math. We are far from the national goal of 100% of students proficient in both subjects by 2014 – and making slow progress. The situation is the same in other mature western economies, notably the UK.

Largely ignored in the world of school reform is a persuasive body of research showing that engaging families can have powerful impacts on student academic achievement and other outcomes, (Henderson and Mapp, 2002; Jeynes, 2005).

A notable example of this disregard occurs in Turning Around Chronically Low-Performing Schools, a 2008 report from the U.S. Department of Education’s ‘What Works Clearinghouse,’ which identifies practices to improve chronically low-performing schools and is still in wide circulation. The report recommends that schools do the following:

• Signal the need for dramatic change with strong leadership
• Maintain a sharp focus on improving instruction by using data to set goals for instructional improvement, make changes to directly affect instruction, and continually reassess student learning and instructional practices to refocus goals.
• Make visible improvements early in the school turnaround process (quick wins), which can rally staff and overcome resistance and inertia.
• Build a staff committed to the school’s improvement goals and qualified to carry out school improvement.¹

References


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<tr>
<th>Subject</th>
<th>4th Grade Proficient</th>
<th>8th Grade Proficient</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Reading</td>
<td>34%</td>
<td>34%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Math</td>
<td>40%</td>
<td>35%</td>
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U.S. National Assessment of Educational Progress 2011 Nation’s Report Card
What if schools added high-impact strategies for engaging families to other practices for improving learning?

Research strongly suggests that engaging families in the following ways can have a significant, sustained and positive impact on student learning:

- Building personal relationships and mutual understanding with families via class meetings, informal one-on-one conversations, and home visits
- Sharing data with families about student skill levels
- Modeling high-impact teaching practices such as dialogic reading and hands-on math activities so families can use them at home
- Listening to families’ ideas about their children’s interests and challenges, and using this input to differentiate instruction
- Incorporating content from families’ home cultures into classroom lessons. (Henderson, Mapp, Johnson and Davies, 2007)

Several studies have found that integrating such family engagement practices into programs to improve instruction can accelerate and sustain student gains, particularly if the practices are combined. For example, a study of 71 high-poverty elementary schools compared the relative effects of standards-based improvements such as visibility of standards, basic or advanced teaching techniques, teacher preparation, teacher ratings of professional development, and a focus on assessment and accountability. The study found that when teachers added outreach to families to the learning strategies, student’s reading and math scores improved at a 50 percent faster rate in reading and a 40 percent faster rate for math. (Westat and Policy Studies Associates, 2001, and see table in References)

Outreach to parents was measured by the extent to which teachers communicated with parents of low-achieving students through:

- Meeting face-to-face
- Sending materials to families on ways to help their children at home
- Telephoning both routinely and when their children were having problems.

Another landmark study of low-income schools in Chicago that had made substantial improvement found that strong ties to families and the community increased four-fold the likelihood that the school would make significant gains in reading and math, (Bryk et al, 2010). See Figure 1. Strong ties included being knowledgeable about community issues and families’ home cultures, inviting families to observe in the classroom, using community resources, working as families with partners to improve learning, and responding to families’ concerns about their children.

Let’s look at a program recently implemented in the Washington, DC public schools (DCPS), one of the lowest-performing school districts in the U.S. The Flamboyan Foundation, in partnership with DCPS, trained teachers to make relationship-building home visits with families of their students, using the Parent-Teacher Home Visiting Program (PTHVP) developed in Sacramento.

In addition, teachers also received training to hold deep conversations with families to share data on student performance and co-construct strategies to help students develop skills that need to be strengthened. Home visits built trust and a culture of collaboration that serves as the foundation for including families in the school’s ‘academic team’ dedicated to improving student learning (O’Brien, 2012).

What happened? At Stanton Elementary, the lowest-performing school in the city, reading scores increased 10 percentage points to 19 percent proficient and math scores increased 19 percentage points to 28 percent proficient, in a single year. Other schools in the pilot program made similar gains. DCPS is planning to scale up the program across the city.

In an innovative program sponsored by the UK Government, engaging parents with their children’s learning has improved performance dramatically for children with special needs and disabilities. The linchpin of the program is collaborative ‘Structured

![Figure 1. How likely is major improvement, given weak or strong supports?](image)

### References


Conversations’ between teachers and parents, targeted on students’ reading and math skills. In a pilot cohort totaling 454 schools, special needs students not only made gains above the national average, but surpassed gains for students without special needs (Humphrey and Squires, 2011).

“The United States now has a standards-based system to hold states and local school districts accountable for raising test scores and reducing achievement gaps among groups of students.”

On average, the students in the program progressed 3.66 points in a year, .66 points beyond the national average of 3.0 points. Not only did the program yield significant gains, it also narrowed the achievement gap between special needs students and their peers without special needs.

The chart below compares gains over one school year in the subsequent national roll out of the program across students in elementary, middle and high school.

The British not-for-profit, Achievement for All 3As is now rolling the program out nationwide in the UK. GEMS Education Solutions is excited to be working in partnership with Achievement for All 3As to introduce a version, to be known as the Parent Engagement and Partnership Program (PEPP), to the United States this year.

What needs to be in place for such high-impact family engagement practices to spread?

There are at least five crucially important factors at play here:

- **A commonly accepted and expansive definition of high-impact family engagement**: Family engagement must be seen as everything family members do to support their children’s learning – guiding them through a complex education system, advocating for them when problems arise, and collaborating with educators and community groups to achieve more equitable and effective learning opportunities. This definition must be systematically integrated into school reform legislation, programs, professional development, technical assistance, and monitoring efforts.

- **Improved teacher capacity**: According to a national survey of teachers in the US, engaging families is the number one area where teachers feel least well prepared and represents their greatest challenge (MetLife Survey of the American Teacher, 2005). Clearly, systematic efforts must be made to help teachers connect with families in ways that are meaningful and effective, and ensure that criteria for teacher quality (both for hiring and evaluation) include proficiency in culturally competent family engagement that is closely tied to improving student learning.

- **Family-school partnerships that are designed to support student achievement and school improvement**: This requires school districts to develop capacity in school and program staffs, so that they can honor and recognize families’ funds of knowledge, connect family engagement to student learning, and create a welcoming, inclusive and inviting culture in every school and classroom.

How Did Gains of Special Needs Students in the AfA Program Compare? (2011-2012)

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<tr>
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<th>English Language Arts</th>
<th>Math</th>
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<tr>
<td>Points gained/national average of all students</td>
<td>3.28</td>
<td>3.09</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Points Gained/Average of Special Needs Students in the AfA Program</td>
<td>4.20</td>
<td>3.83</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Points Gained/National Average of all Special Needs Students</td>
<td>2.86</td>
<td>2.57</td>
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References


http://www.edutopia.org/blog/academic-parent-teacher-teams-anne-obrien
Graph references

1. Teachers emphasizing basic instruction spend more time with worksheets, reading aloud, and other types of relatively routine skill practice.

2. Outreach to low achievers’ parents measured in third grade was associated with both the predicted third-grade score and the score gain from third to fifth grade. For that variable, the figure reflects a significant difference in the predicted third-grade score (603.5) rather than the average third-grade score (608.6).
Parents are the key to their children’s future. Never has there been such a strong focus on parental engagement in children’s learning. This is reflected in government policy in England (DfES, 2007) and in the wider research literature. The recent report, *Schools and Parents*, (Ofsted, 2011) outlined effective strategies used by some schools to involve parents. The evidence from the international base shows a strong association between parental support of children’s education and their academic achievement (Desforges and Abouchaar, 2003; O’Brien and Shemilt, 2003; Harris and Goodall, 2007; Goodall et al, 2011, Gorard et al., 2012 and OECD, 2011).

In England however, parental engagement in children’s education is a relatively undeveloped field. Previously it was determined by the school. This may in part account for the variable quality of parental involvement/engagement across schools in England today (Barlow and Humphrey, 2012). Ofsted (2011: 5) showed the greater involvement of parents in children’s learning in primary and special schools; for children with special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND), joint home-school working was a key feature across phase and school type leading to enhanced outcomes for pupils.

Recent government documents such as *Support and Aspiration: a new approach to special educational needs and disability*, (DfE, 2011) and its response, *Support and Aspiration: a new approach to special educational needs and disability, Progress and next steps*, (DfE, 2012), reflect the greater emphasis on parental voice, proposing choice and control for parents.

However, it was the Lamb Inquiry (2009) into special educational needs and parental confidence which provided the impetus for real change. It called for both increased engagement of parents and brought greater focus to the meaning of effective parental engagement in their children’s learning. This is reflected in the following comment:

“…if communication exchange is handled well this can improve parents’ confidence as they are treated as real partners with an important contribution. As one parent interviewee said: ‘It gives you a sense of input...you feel like you do have some influence.’”


Effective joint parent-school partnerships may also contribute to parent social and emotional well-being, thus improving the relationship with their child (Cramm and Nieboet, 2012). Their research highlighted the negative impact of poor parental social and emotional well-being on the quality of life of children and young people with intellectual disabilities (Cramm and Nieboet, 2012).

This is further supported by Humphrey and Squires (2011). In their national evaluation of the Achievement for All pilot program in schools, their findings showed the positive impact on family life when parents are given the opportunity to talk to teachers about their child, his/her aspirations and to engage in setting meaningful learning targets.

References


Harris, A. and J. Goodall (2007). Engaging Parents in Raising Achievement. Do Parents Know They Matter? Department for Children, Schools and Families


OECD (2011) What can parents do to help their children succeed in school? PISA in Focus 10
For those with high needs, loosely defined by the government as those needing provision costing approximately £10,000 per annum (DfE, 2012), legislation is favourable to parental involvement. Although the term is not defined by an assessment threshold (e.g. ‘statemented’1) to avoid contradictory incentives for claiming money, it is quite likely that this group of learners will qualify for an Education and Health Care Plan. Parental choice and autonomy will then be supported by the local offer.

Sadly many parents do not realise that they have a part in their children’s learning. This puts greater burden on schools to find effective ways to involve them; this can take varying forms with varying degrees of impact. Examples of parents supporting children’s learning include:

- At home, e.g. through homework, talking to them, reading to them;
- At school, e.g. volunteering in school, attending parents evenings; and,
- Through school-home partnerships, where traditionally parents engage in their children’s learning, e.g. meetings with teachers to discuss their children and aspirations for their children, setting targets, parent-child learning together programs.

But how effective are these as mechanisms for real parental engagement in children’s learning?

For schools, ‘getting it right’ for learners with high needs and their parents, requires careful consideration as to what is meant by ‘parental support’. Research literature refers to parental involvement and parental engagement. Both terms are used interchangeably and neither is clearly defined, with indices being set by the researchers. This subjective approach leaves the defining parameters of effective parental support of children’s learning open to interpretation at the school level. Harris and Goodall (2007) on the other hand, highlight the nature of parental engagement, which ‘is not about engaging with the school, but with the learning of the child’ where ‘engagement implies that parents are an essential part of the learning process, an extended part of the pedagogic process’.

This approach provides a holistic view of parental engagement within the context of increasing the aspirations of teachers, high needs children and their parents and the access and achievements of the children and young people. Across high performing education systems within OECD ( Organisation for Economic co-operation and Development) countries and economies parents, teachers and citizens have a belief that all children can succeed (OECD, 2010). The Lamb Inquiry (DCSF, 2009) delineated a revolutionary approach to effective parental engagement for children and young people with SEND: its far-sighted outlook has yet to be realized across schools in England.

Professor Sonia Blandford is Founder and CEO of Achievement for All 3As.
Dr. Catherine Knowles leads on research for Achievement for All 3As.

References
Department for Education (2011) Support and Aspiration: a new approach to special educational needs and disability, Nottingham: DfE
Department for Education (2012) Support and Aspiration: a new approach to special educational needs and disability, Progress and next steps, Nottingham: DfE

1 In England a ‘statement of special needs’ is a formal document detailing a child’s learning difficulties and the help that will be given, hence the expression ‘statemented’.

Ready or Not?
Why Future Educators Need a College Course on School, Family, and Community Partnerships

by Joyce Epstein

Everyone knows that family and community involvement is important for student success in school. There is a big gap, however, between knowing and doing what needs to be done to engage all families in their children's education. The challenge for schools, colleges, and departments of education is to prepare future teachers and administrators to understand new research on the nature and results of school, family, and community partnerships and to learn how to implement research-based practices that will engage their own students' families in ways that contribute to student learning and development.

Today, as in the past, there are few required courses on partnership program development for future teachers and administrators. Some colleges of education offer an elective course, mainly to graduate students. Some 'cover' connections with families in a class or two of some other course. Others do little or nothing on family and community engagement except for those who will teach early childhood education or students with special needs.

The haphazard nature of preparation on partnerships is well documented. Deans and department chairs strongly agreed that family and community involvement is very important for teachers, administrators, and counselors. They also reported that their institution's coverage is inadequate and that their graduates are unprepared to work effectively with the families of students in the schools in which they are placed (Epstein & Sanders, 2006; Miller, Lines, Sullivan, & Hermanutz, 2013).

Critics and reformers of teacher education also know that new teachers are not ready for the challenges they will face in today's schools (Levine, 2006). Teacher education programs have been criticized for weak curricula; courses that ignore results of new research; and limited contact with real schools, students, families, and communities. These weaknesses would be addressed, in part, if new educators were prepared with a comprehensive course on partnership program development.

Ready or not for today's students and families?
Today, teachers have students from highly diverse families that differ in size and structure, in socioeconomic, racial, linguistic, cultural, and academic backgrounds, or all of the above. Teachers, counselors, administrators, and others in schools (e.g., nurses, office workers, food specialists) must know how to communicate with all students' families in positive ways that build mutual respect, trust, and appreciation of each other. Only then, will all students have multiple sources of support to encourage them to succeed at each grade level, plan postsecondary education, and become productive young adults.

“Teachers, counselors, administrators, and others in schools (e.g., nurses, office workers, food specialists) must know how to communicate with all students’ families in positive ways that build mutual respect, trust, and appreciation of each other.”

In a comprehensive college course, future educators should learn that research overwhelmingly confirms the importance of engaging all families in their children's

References


education. Professors of education report that many future teachers carry unacceptable stereotypes of parents with low income, parents who speak languages other than English at home, and other marginalized groups—in effect dismissing them as unimportant influences in their children’s lives. Decades of surveys and studies of parents disprove these stereotypes (Chavkin, 1993), and practical programs in diverse communities show that, in fact, the opposite is true (Hutchins, et al., 2012). That is, just about all parents care deeply about their child’s happiness, education, and future. Most, however, report that they need and want good, clear and timely guidance on how to support and guide children’s learning and advances in school. New teachers must be prepared to work with the parents they will meet in every school in which they teach.

“In a comprehensive college course, future educators should learn that research overwhelmingly confirms the importance of engaging all families in their children’s education.”

Ready or not to conduct a partnership program - not just activities?
A comprehensive college course should introduce future educators to important content and specific strategies that change unplanned or ‘random’ family involvement activities (which are too common in schools, today) to planned, organized, and purpose-driven partnership programs (Weiss, Lopez, & Rosenberg, 2010). Future teachers and administrators should be clear and comfortable with four research-based directions for organizing and conducting more effective school, family, and community partnerships that contribute to student success in school. These are teamwork for program development, goal-linked partnership activities, equity in outreach to all families, and evaluation of program quality and results of partnership activities (Epstein, 2011; Epstein et al., 2009).

Teamwork requires teachers and administrators to establish and maintain a school-based team, an official committee of teachers, parents, administrators, and others who will work together to plan, conduct, evaluate, and continually improve goal-linked activities that engage all families and selected community partners in productive ways. A partnership team extends concepts of ‘distributed leadership’ by enabling parents on the team to take leadership, along with principals and teachers, for developing and conducting activities that engage all parents in their children’s education at school and at home—including those who were previously uninvolved or excluded. This reduces the burden felt by teachers and principals that each one must work alone in connecting with families and community partners. Teamwork creates an energy and school climate that speaks ‘partnership’ to all students and families.

Goal-linked partnerships require teachers and administrators to ensure that involvement activities contribute to student achievement and positive attitudes about school. It is no longer acceptable to waste teachers’ and parents’ time on involvement activities for involvement sake. Many studies and related field work confirm that goal-linked partnership practices help to improve the school’s welcoming climate, boost student learning, improve attendance, and reduce problem behaviors (Fan & Chen, 2001; Jeynes, 2012).

For example, if teachers are working with students to improve reading skills and attitudes, then a good school plan for partnerships will include some activities that inform and engage parents with students on reading (Senechal & Young, 2008). A comprehensive plan will activate six types of involvement (Epstein, et al., 2009; Nathans & Reville, 2013) to engage parents and community partners with children on reading in different ways and in different locations. This helps more students see that reading is enjoyable and important to their parents and to other adults in the community. Strong reading involvement activities will be linked to state reading standards at each grade level. This will help more students practice skills that will affect their success in school. Similarly, families and community partners can be engaged with students in activities that focus on math, science, attendance, behavior, planning for college and careers, and other goals for student success (Sheldon, 2009).

Equitable partnerships require teachers, administrators, and partnership teams to reach out to all families, not just the easiest to reach. Evaluating partnerships—a strategy missing from most past programs of parental involvement—requires the school team and district leaders to assess the quality of school programs and progress in engaging all families in ways that contribute to student attitudes and achievement.

Countless studies conducted over many years confirm the importance of these structures and processes for...
higher quality partnership programs. Future teachers and administrators should study and discuss these new directions, test the structures and processes in practice, and be prepared to establish effective, equitable, and sustainable partnership programs in their own schools.

Ready or not to offer a college course for future educators on partnerships?

Studies are accumulating that show that if future teachers take college courses on family and community engagement, they increase their knowledge, empathy, and confidence in communicating with parents and community partners in meaningful ways (see special issue edited by Quezada, Alexandrowicz, & Molina, 2013). More professors of education should feel comfortable and competent about conducting a comprehensive course on partnerships using an updated text that includes research readings, topics for class discussion, field experiences, and short and long-term projects (Epstein, 2011); other compendia of practical ideas (Henderson, Mapp, Johnson, & Davies, 2007); and hundreds of examples of practical involvement activities in preschools, elementary, middle, and high schools (Epstein, et al., 2009, and see the section Success Stories at www.partnershipschools.org).

In addition to new content for college courses on partnerships, professors of education should consider innovative instructional strategies that will enliven learning and deepen the skills of future teachers. These include discussion and debate topics and field activities that bring future educators in contact with families who have children at different grade levels and with different challenges (Epstein, 2011; Evans; Martinez & Ulanoff, 2013). For example, one effective strategy—Family as Faculty—organizes parent panels so that future teachers hear from and interact with diverse parents (Parents Reaching Out, 2010). New educators will increase their understanding of family situations if they hear the stories, experiences, dreams for their children, and suggestions for useful involvement activities from parents who have children with special educational needs, unique and advanced talents, or who may be learning English, themselves.

College classroom activities can be highly interactive if, for example, students role play (and switch roles) in parent-teacher conferences to discuss a successful student and a struggling student, or to discuss students’ scores on state tests or report cards (Mehlig & Shumow, 2013). These and other activities will help professors of education create course content and learning experiences that will prepare future teachers and administrators to understand the power of partners in children’s education.

It should be noted that, even with a required, comprehensive course in college, practicing educators will need in-service education and ongoing technical assistance to customize practices of family and community involvement for the goals, needs, and interests of their own students and families (Epstein, et al., 2009). Teachers and principals must ‘know the families’ of the children they teach (Hands, 2013).

Conclusion

It is well known that, from the first day to the last day of their professional careers, educators communicate with students and their families in many ways and at every grade level. Just as teachers are prepared to teach subjects and administrators are prepared to manage budgets, all educators also need to know how to mobilize all of the resources that will help students succeed in school. It is high time—indeed, it is way past time—for future teachers and administrators to have a required, comprehensive course on school, family, and community partnerships so that they are ready for this reality.

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References


Varkey GEMS Foundation
Ambassadors’ Survey of Parental Engagement in Children’s Education

by Peter Davies

Introduction
In June 2012, the Varkey GEMS Foundation Ambassadors initiative was launched. The purpose of the Foundation Ambassadors is to encourage members of the GEMS/VGF family to disseminate the best educational practice and ideas fostered within GEMS to the wider, global community. The initial cohort of over thirty Ambassadors who volunteered was made up of teachers, paraprofessional and support staff from GEMS schools in Dubai. The focus of the 2012 initiative was family and parent engagement in education and the VGF Ambassadors spent one day being coached in ways to engage families in dialogue about their involvement in their children’s education. Ambassadors were also asked to collect data from families about involvement by completing a survey.

Findings
The number of respondents to the survey from a total of twenty countries was 570. Of these, 48% were Indian with two Tamil respondents. The next largest groups were Sudanese (16%), Venezuelan (14%) and Macedonian (11%). Other respondents included small numbers (ten or less) who were Bosnian, British, Canadian, Egyptian, Equadorian, French, German, Lebanese, Pakistani, Roma Gypsy, Serbian, Syrian, Saudi Arabian and US American (see Figure 1).

Nationality
Most families were urban or suburban (77%). The most frequently occurring family size was two children (44%) whilst 35% recorded more than three children in the family, with 12% being families with three children and just short of 10% having a single child. This compares with Population Action’s 2005 global census data. Most of the respondents were parents (79%) with approximately twice the number of mothers as fathers responding. Other respondents included a range of family members and a very small percentage of guardians (0.7%).

References
For more information about the Varkey GEMS Foundation please see http://www.gemseducation.com

Figure 1 Nationality of Respondents

Figure 2 Communication with school

How often families met (or communicated) with their child’s teacher to discuss learning

Number of respondents

Once a week - 0
Once a month - 50
Once a year - 150
Never - 250

11% Others
11% Macedonian
14% Venezuelan
16% Sudanese
48% Indian
The largest group (32%) of respondents was not specific about their occupation. 29% were employed in traditional professional work: doctor, lawyer, teacher, banker, manager, etc. A further 16% were in government service but the skill level of occupation was not described; 16% were housewives and therefore assumed to be ‘stay at home parents’; 5% referred to themselves as unemployed. Less than 2% were manual trade workers.

Generally, respondents reported good communication with their schools (Figure 2) about their children’s learning and progress, with 82% stating that they understood their child’s strengths at school. A specific question that asked parents if they understood where their child struggled at school was answered positively by 77%.

The pie chart (Figure 3) presents what respondents saw as the most important contributions they made to their children’s learning. The two activities that parents thought most important for them to engage in with their children were reading and talking. For 29%, talking (in one way or another) was the most important activity and for 27% it was reading (Figure 3).

This is good news for these families because copious volumes of international research point to raised levels of achievement where parents engage in activities such as reading and talking with their children. Although only 2% valued religious teaching as important in supporting their child’s strengths at school, 32% saw religious teaching as very important in their child’s education.

There were no significant differences between predominantly Muslim and predominantly Christian countries in this response. Similarly, although community service was not greatly valued as a lever for learning at home, 30% of respondents saw it as a very important educational element. Further similar, but less strong disparities were present between what was seen as important for learning as opposed to what parents valued in education.

Parents who spent more than three, but less than five hours a week helping their children learn represented 60% of the sample. Only 4% spent less than one hour helping their child’s learning and 36% spent more than five hours. The reasons cited for helping children learn at home were related to achieving similar socio-economic success to their own, progressing to higher education and gaining a higher standard of living.

The survey instrument was compiled principally to test the hypothesis that GEMS personnel could engage as Ambassadors with families in their home locales and gather important data. In this sense it proved a tool fit for purpose. The survey was one element of a two-part mission, the other being that Ambassadors would work proactively on a project of their choosing to enhance educational opportunities for high need families. Project reports are pending review by the editorial team.

The number of responses to the survey from twenty countries was encouraging, and represents the successful efforts of a number of Ambassadors. There was no accessible data on the important question of the value placed on girls’ education, unfortunately, because of frequent misunderstanding of the survey question.

Conclusions

Although this was a relatively small survey administered by volunteers, the data from the Ambassadors’ survey would seem to suggest a strong parental belief in the need to support children’s learning, especially through reading and talking together. Parents appeared to have strong aspirations for their children and wanted them to be socially engaged in community activities and to receive religious education, though few saw this as contributing to their overall learning.

It would be valuable to know what type of parents (e.g. professional/manual; wealthy/poor) spent most time in family learning activities. The limitations of the survey instrument prevented us from establishing this definitely, but based on the information we did have, families of professional and skilled workers were disproportionately represented (45%).

In the UAE, GEMS has made the connection between family support for learning and achievement, through a parental engagement initiative running in all its schools. GEMS Education Solutions is championing parent engagement world-wide through its Parent Engagement Global Initiative (PE-GI). The importance attached to religious education is noteworthy. Again it would be helpful to know more about the religious affiliations of the major respondent groups. This would enable us to understand whether, for instance, this interest stems from adherence to religious orthodoxy, or from broader humanitarian belief that religious education helps children grow up well.

Peter Davies is Director GEMS Parent Engagement Global Initiative (PE-GI). Additional research assistance was provided by Rana Awad: Manager Varkey GEMS Foundation, Rose Mooklen: Coordinator Varkey GEMS Foundation, Dubai, and Kathryn Nderitu, Research Analyst, Hexis Consulting, Kenya.
“GEMS educates 130,000 students from over 150 nationalities across four continents. Our consultancy arm, GEMS Education Solutions works with governments to lift school performance and improve the standards and expertise of government schools across the globe.”