

# Practical Leadership

*Improving the Schools of Today*

*Inventing the Schools of Tomorrow*

## RESEARCH INTO PRACTICE

### Family Engagement

#### In A Nutshell

The evidence about parental and family engagement with school is clear. When families are active partners with their child's school there is a positive impact on things educators care about, things like achievement, attendance and aspirations for the future (Epstein, et.al, 2002; Henderson & Mapp, 2002). Virtually all educators recognize the importance of families being involved in their child's school but still struggle to develop viable plans for promoting such engagement particularly among families of limited means or who may be recent immigrants. This brief will discuss parent and family engagement but the primary focus will be on how teachers and principals can develop and implement plans that increase parent and family engagement among all parent groups but especially among these underserved populations.

#### What Do We Know About Family Involvement?

Joyce Epstein from the Center on School, Family and Community Partnerships at John Hopkins University (<http://www.csos.jhu.edu/p2000/center.htm>) synthesized the research on family engagement and found that:

- Just about all families care about their children and want them to succeed. They also want better information from their child's school so that they can be good partners with the school.
- Almost all teachers and administrators want to involve families but many do not know how to go about building positive and productive partnerships with parents and families.
- Virtually all students at all levels, elementary, middle and high school, want their families to be more engaged with their school and knowledgeable about the schools programs. Students say they are willing to be active partners in supporting communication between home and school. (Epstein, et.al., 2002)

The research shows that affluent communities have more robust family engagement than economically distressed communities. It also shows that schools in more economically distressed communities more frequently contact families about problems and difficulties than positive accomplishments. Further, single parents, parents employed outside the home, parents living far from school, and fathers are generally less involved.

**The Good News** - However, when schools develop and implement appropriate grade and school level practices each of these barriers can be reversed. Parent and family engagement is strong in economically distressed communities when teachers and administrators build positive relationships with students' families, develop balanced partnership programs including contacts about positive student accomplishments, and schedule school activities and opportunities for involvement at times and places that fit the needs of diverse parent communities.

#### Six Components of Family Engagement Programs

The National Association of Young Children ([www.naeyc.org](http://www.naeyc.org)) identified six elements to an effective family engagement program (Halgunseth, L. & Peterson, A., 2009). Successful programs are ongoing, reciprocal and strengths-based. They should:

- Encourage family participation
- Provide consistent, two-way opportunity for communication
- Allow opportunity for families to share their knowledge, skills and culture
- Extend learning activities into the home
- Support parents developing a home learning environment
- Provide training to staff to help them fully engage with families.

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## Six Types of Involvement

The National Network of Partnership Skills at the Center on School, Family and Community Partnerships identified six types of involvement.

- **Type 1: Parenting** – Assist families with setting home conditions to support their children as students. This also includes helping school personnel understand the families who send students to their school.
- **Type 2: Communicating** – Develop effective communications between school and home and from home to school about school programs and student progress. Recognize the importance of two-way communication to parents and from parents.
- **Type 3: Volunteering** – Organize opportunities for parents and others to support the school and its students. Provide volunteer opportunities in various locations, at various times and in varied formats.
- **Type 4: Learning at Home** – Involve families with their children on homework and other curriculum related activities and decisions.
- **Type 5: Decision-Making** – Include families as participants in school decisions and develop parent leaders and representatives.
- **Type 6: Collaborating with the Community** – Coordinate resources and services with other community agencies and make the school an active partner in providing services to families, students and the community.

Additional information about these six types of involvement is available at <http://tinyurl.com/lkq48j6> and <http://www.csos.jhu.edu/p2000/sixtypes.htm>. A link to schools with promising practices is provided later in this brief.

Too often a school's family engagement plans focus on communication from school to home and opportunities for parents to volunteer during the school day. The Center on School, Family and Community Partnerships found that a comprehensive approach, including all six types of involvement, is characteristic of the most successful partnerships with families.

## Family Engagement and Rural School Communities

While the evidence about family engagement is clear, many schools, particularly those in rural areas, lack the resources to support comprehensive family-school partnerships. Because rural schools hold a unique position in their community, often serving as the center of community activities, there is tremendous potential to connect school, family and community. Poverty in rural America is rising and social services for many poor, rural families are either non-existent or available only by traveling great distances. There can also be stigma attached to seeking outside help for academic or behavioral problems. In many rural communities the norm is for families to deal with problems themselves rather than seek help and support (Witte & Sheridan, 2011). Resources related to family engagement in rural communities is available in the resource section of this brief.

## Family Engagement and Latino Families

Latino families are often less involved in their children's school. This is often interpreted as indifference or lack of concern. But research shows that not to be true. Latino families want to be involved with their children's schooling but they want to be welcomed as active partners. Too often school personnel interact with Latino families from a deficit model. They assume every Latino adult is "illegal." They share problems, rather than strengths. They see involvement as intrusive, rather than supportive. They assume families from culturally diverse backgrounds may need "parenting skills" to help overcome their child's "deficits." Such an approach has been shown to generate resistance among many Latino families (Olivos, 2004; Sobel & Kuglar, 2007).

Studies show that Latino parents seek authentic involvement in their children's schooling. That includes access to information, access to bilingual and bicultural education, a welcoming, rather than hostile, approach from school personnel, and an authentic voice in their child's education, not just superficial interaction (Olivos, 2009). Additional information and links to resources for family engagement and Latino families is available in the resources section of this brief.

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## **Family Engagement and Poor Families**

The evidence is that families of limited means want to be involved in their children's education (Epstein, et.al, 2002). But poor families experience many of the same barriers encountered by Latino families only without the language barrier. Schools are perceived to be bastions of middle-class values often staffed with teachers and administrators who lack understanding of poverty, especially generational poverty (Payne, 2013). Schools frequently offer opportunities for involvement that are shaped by majority, middle class norms about what involvement looks like. Often there is a narrow definition of "appropriate" involvement and it is guided by race and class biases about appropriateness. For example, "appropriate" involvement may be donating goods or services to the school, assisting in the classroom or being part of a volunteer group. Limiting engagement to these few, school-defined opportunities limits the participation of many poor and Latino parents (Olivos, 2009; Payne, 2013; Sobel & Kuglar, 2007).

In recent years concern has arisen about stereotypes of poor students and their families engendered by publications like Payne's *Framework for Understanding Poverty* (2013) and workshops based on her work (Bomer, R., Dworin, J., May, L. & Semingson, P., 2008; Gorski, 2008 ). There is concern that these materials generate stereotypes of poor families that are not true and that poor families are a problem in need of fixing. For example, there is a myth that poor parents are uninvolved in their children's education because they don't value education. The truth is just the opposite. Poor parents hold the same attitudes about education as more affluent parents. There is worry that relying solely on Payne and colleagues work can result in inappropriate generalizations about the poor. Poor families, like all families, are comprised of individuals and it is inappropriate to generalize about them.

Additional information about family engagement and poor families is available in the resource section of this brief.

## **Getting Started on Strengthening Family Engagement**

A synthesis of the literature on family engagement cited in this brief reveals six strategies that can be used to improve engagement of parents and families at your school.

- 1. Check Assumptions and Stereotypes** – Be careful about assumptions and stereotypes about families. Most teachers and employees share a middle class background and view the role of parents through their own experience. Recognize that a diverse family community reflects a variety of values, beliefs about the role of families and their relationship to school, and comfort in interacting with school personnel. Often Latino and poor families feel unwanted and unwelcome in their child's school. Be cautious about relying on training, books and other resources that makes generalizations about poor families or families of diverse cultures. Do not organize your family engagement program around majority, middle-class norms and values. A single approach to family engagement will not succeed with all families.
- 2. Build Trusting Relationships** – Personal relationships are important when working with families. Many families are more comfortable interacting with school personnel in smaller, more intimate settings where it may be possible to share information and ask questions. Latino families are often concerned about being dismissed due to language or cultural barriers. They are aware of the stereotypes present among school employees and other parents and may resist participating in parent activities where those stereotypes may be displayed. Identify ways to meet and talk with families at churches or community centers off campus. Your outreach must be culturally sensitive and specific to each cultural group. Similarly, families of limited means share these concerns and resist participating in programs where involvement is measured by the economic resources you can contribute to the school.
- 3. Value Robust Two-Way Communication** – All families want to be active partners in their children's education. An important part of family engagement is their sense of efficacy, believing that they can contribute to their child's education. The literature repeatedly discusses the importance of both learning from families about their children as well as sharing information about their children's schooling with them. Too often school communication occurs just one way, school to family and just about problems rather than successes. Families, particularly families of limited means, but also families from diverse cultures, perceive that the school may not value their knowledge about their own child. They may resist sharing information that re-enforces assumptions they believe school employees hold about their family and their child. Schools often create structures for families to share information but those systems are built on middle-class norms about when and how to interact with the school.

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- 4. Identify Authentic Opportunities to Learn From Families** – Just as two-way communication is essential, so is creating opportunities for families of diverse backgrounds to share their knowledge and skills. Families enjoy the opportunity to contribute their knowledge to the school’s program. Don’t rely on a family engagement program based solely on fund-raising or other resource-based programs. Many families are eager for an opportunity to provide leadership. Seek opportunities for Latino families and families of limited means to participate in decision-making groups. That may require working with community leaders to identify members comfortable with that role.
- 5. Train Teachers and Other Staff** – It’s important to work with teachers and other staff to become knowledgeable about the diversity present in your school community. The most effective learning occurs when members of these diverse communities are part of the training. Their involvement makes the training more authentic and signals the community that you are committed to learning about and respecting the diversity present in your school. As stated earlier, do not rely on a single book or training session to form generalizations about poor or Latino families. Those materials may only re-enforce negative assumptions and stereotypes.
- 6. Develop and Implement a Plan** – Improving family engagement requires an intentional plan of action. Good intentions are noble but a systematic, sustained commitment requires planning and resource allocation. The best plans are developed with families and community. Current governance structures like the School Improvement Team or the PTO may not adequately reflect the diversity of point of view central to a successful plan. Assure that your planning team is diverse and involves each group that will be part of the plan.

## **Invitational Education – One Way to Think About Improving Parent and Family Engagement**

Nearly all teachers and principals recognize the importance of engaging parents and families in the education of their children and want to improve relationships with families. The Invitational Education Model (Purkey, 1978) created by William Purkey decades ago, and still in use today, offers a way to think about how to improve parent and family engagement. Invitational Education identified five areas of school life that create the environmental framework of a school. When school personnel address each of the five areas they can change the way their school is viewed by parents and community, and at the same time, improve student achievement. Central to the model is recognition that every aspect of school life sends subtle messages to parents and students about values, priorities and whether they feel “invited” to be part of the school. The model includes these five parts.

- **People** – Recognizes the importance of relationships in a school community and focuses on respect, caring, and honoring the diversity. It recognizes the “inviting” influence of teachers, staff and administrators in the school.
- **Places** – This relates to the physical aspect of the school and how “inviting” your campus may be from the moment a parent arrives at your school or accesses your school’s website.
- **Policies** – This aspect deals with the “inviting” aspects of school rules and regulations. How does your school appear when families review your student handbook or read your school’s newsletter or other communications?
- **Programs** – This component recognizes the various programs that are part of a school community. Do parents and families feel “invited” to become an authentic part of that community or are messages sent that limit participation?
- **Processes** – Perhaps the most vital part of the model, processes refers to the values and attitudes that shape every part of the school’s program. What are the unspoken norms? How do teachers and other personnel talk about parents and their involvement? Is it welcomed or resisted? Are families blamed or do personnel seek authentic partnerships?

(Purkey, 1978; Purkey & Novak, 1996; Shoffner & Vacc, 1999; Williamson & Shoffner, 2001)

Additional Information About Invitational Education is available in the resource section of this brief.

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## The Bottom Line

Almost all families, regardless of circumstances, want their children to succeed in school. They also want to be actively engaged with the school. Not only do they want to participate in school activities, have opportunities to volunteer and contribute to the school, they want to be authentically involved in making decisions about their child's school experience. That means teachers and other school staff must welcome communication from the family to the school, respect varied family structures and diverse cultural backgrounds, celebrate students strengths and assets, and provide "real" ways for parents to make decisions about their children's educational experience.

## PROMISING PRACTICES

**The National Network of Partnership Schools** recognizes "promising practices" each year and has both print and electronic information available from 1998-2012. You can access the site here:

<http://www.csos.jhu.edu/p2000/PPP/index.htm>

A few specific examples from the Partnership are available at these sites

Pasco HS, Pasco, WA (2011)

[http://www.csos.jhu.edu/p2000/Awards/2011/school/pasco\\_hs.html](http://www.csos.jhu.edu/p2000/Awards/2011/school/pasco_hs.html)

Park Middle School, Kennewick, WA (2011)

<http://www.csos.jhu.edu/p2000/Awards/2011/school/park.html>

McLoughlin Middle School, Pasco, WA (2011)

<http://www.csos.jhu.edu/p2000/Awards/2011/school/mclaughlin.html>

Highlands Middle School, Kennewick, WA (2011)

[http://www.csos.jhu.edu/p2000/Awards/2011/school/highlands\\_ms.html](http://www.csos.jhu.edu/p2000/Awards/2011/school/highlands_ms.html)

Ellen Ochoa Middle School, Pasco, WA (2011)

<http://www.csos.jhu.edu/p2000/Awards/2011/school/eochoa.html>

### Harvard Family Research Project

<http://www.hfrp.org/>

One component of this center is work on [family involvement](#). The site includes access to publications, resources and research on family involvement including a regular [newsletter](#) about promising practices. Other resources from the center include:

**Seeing is Believing: Promising Practices for Promoting Family Engagement** (Westmoreland, Rosenberg, Lopez & Weiss, 2009)

<http://tinyurl.com/qa9yzw8>

This report describes an approach to family engagement using district-wide strategies, building capacity and reaching out to all families. It provides brief vignettes about proven practices.

**The Evaluation Exchange: Beyond the Bake Sale: How School Districts Can Promote Family Involvement**

<http://tinyurl.com/3r2qvwd>

This article, adapted from the book *Beyond the Bake Sale* (Henderson, Mapp, Johnson & Davies, 2007) discusses how districts can create a culture that supports high levels of family engagement.

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## Promising Practices (cont.)

### **Family Connections to Peers and Community – National Center on Parent, Family and Community Engagement**

<http://tinyurl.com/ltu889v>

This paper discusses the importance of social networks for parents as way of supporting and benefiting their children in school.

### **Engaged Parents, Successful Students (2012)**

<http://tinyurl.com/n5ytex>

This report describes the success of The Road Map Project in South King County, WA in communities with many low-income, children of color.

### **Walking the Walk: Portraits of Leadership for Family Engagement in Urban Schools**

<http://www.eric.ed.gov/PDFS/EJ847415.pdf>

This article, while anchored in urban settings, provides useful examples of strategies for building relationships with families of limited means in diverse communities.

## REFERENCES

- Bomer, R., Dworin, J., May, L. & Semington, P. (2008). Miseducating teachers about the Poor: A Critical Analysis of Ruby Payne's Claims About Poverty. *Teachers College Record*, 110(12), pp. 2497-2531.  
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- Gorski, P. (2008). The Myth of the Culture of Poverty. *Educational Leadership*, 65(7), pp. 32-36.  
<http://tinyurl.com/3a7hsop>
- Payne, R. (2013). *A Framework for Understanding Poverty: A Cognitive Approach*. (5<sup>th</sup> edition). Highlands, TX: aha! Process, Inc.  
Chapter 6 of this updated version of Payne's book provides useful examples and ideas for improving support among parents. Chapter 7 offers strategies for building relationships with poor families.
- Schafft, K. A., Prins, E. & Movit, M. (2008). *Poverty, Residential Mobility, and Persistence Across Urban and Family Literacy Programs in Pennsylvania*. University Park, PA: Goodling Institute for Research in Family Literacy.
- Warren, M. & Mapp, K. (2011). *A Match on Dry Grass: Community Organizing as a Catalyst for School Reform*. New York: Oxford University Press.

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## ONLINE RESOURCES

### General Resources on Parent and Family Involvement

**National Network of Partnership Schools** – John Hopkins, Joyce Epstein, Director

<http://www.csos.jhu.edu/p2000/>

This site provides an overview of the National Network of Partnership Schools at the Center for School, Family and Community Partnerships including a link to evaluation reports on the effectiveness of the model.

**National Network Partnership Planner**

<http://www.csos.jhu.edu/p2000/pdf/partnership-planner.pdf>

This link provides a planner that can be used to develop a plan for parent and family engagement

**School Model**

[http://www.csos.jhu.edu/p2000/nnps\\_model/school.htm](http://www.csos.jhu.edu/p2000/nnps_model/school.htm)

This link introduces a comprehensive school model for parent and family engagement.

**Six Types of Involvement**

[http://www.csos.jhu.edu/p2000/nnps\\_model/school/sixtypes.htm](http://www.csos.jhu.edu/p2000/nnps_model/school/sixtypes.htm)

This provides additional information about the six types of involvement suggested by the National Network.

**Family Engagement, Diverse Families: An Integrated Review of the Literature** (Halgunseth & Peterson, 2009)

[http://www.naeyc.org/files/naeyc/file/ecprofessional/EDF\\_Literature%20Review.pdf](http://www.naeyc.org/files/naeyc/file/ecprofessional/EDF_Literature%20Review.pdf)

This report provides a comprehensive review of the literature on family engagement.

### Search Institute

<http://www.search-institute.org/>

This nonprofit organization focuses on the assets that teens and families bring to schools. The site provides useful resources including a Developmental Assets Profile that can be used to identify the assets available in your community. Their focus is on developing relationships between schools, students and their families.

**Southwest Educational Development Lab** - (Henderson & Mapp, 2002)

**A New Wave of Evidence: The Impact of School, Family and Community Connections on Student Achievement.** –

<http://www.sedl.org/connections/resources/evidence.pdf>

This comprehensive report on effective practices for engaging families provides evidence about the positive impact engaging families has on student learning. It also provides explicit case studies of effective practices in schools serving diverse family and cultural communities.

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## Family Engagement and Rural Families

### **National Center for Research on Rural Education (R2Ed)**

<http://r2ed.unl.edu/>

### **Family Engagement in Rural Schools** (Witte & Sheridan, 2011)

[http://r2ed.unl.edu/workingpapers/2011/2011\\_2\\_Witte\\_Sheridan.pdf](http://r2ed.unl.edu/workingpapers/2011/2011_2_Witte_Sheridan.pdf)

This report synthesizes the research on family engagement in rural schools and provides an extensive list of references for additional information.

### **Family-School Connections in Rural Educational Settings** (Semke & Sheridan, 2011)

[http://r2ed.unl.edu/workingpapers/2011/2011\\_1\\_Semke\\_Sheridan.pdf](http://r2ed.unl.edu/workingpapers/2011/2011_1_Semke_Sheridan.pdf)

This report reviews the current research on family involvement in rural schools and identified practices that were facilitators of family engagement as well as those that inhibited engagement.

### **A Rural High School's Collaborative Approach to School Improvement** (Chance & Segura, 2009)

[http://r2ed.unl.edu/docs/research\\_digests/2009\\_chance\\_segura.pdf](http://r2ed.unl.edu/docs/research_digests/2009_chance_segura.pdf)

This report describes how a rural high school engaged families and community in a significant improvement program that yielded sustained improvements in proficiency rates, pass rates, attendance and graduation over a five-year period. A link to the entire study is available at this site.

### **The Rural Solution: How Community Schools Can Reinvigorate Rural Education** (Williams, 2010)

<https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/education/report/2010/09/22/8376/the-rural-solution/>

This report discusses how small rural schools can become community schools by increasing parent, family and community engagement. It provides three examples of schools that have been successful becoming community schools.

## Family Engagement and Latino Families

### **Latino Parents in the Public Schools: Critical Perspectives on Their Involvement** (Olivos, 2009)

<http://old.collierschools.com/fsgrants/docs/LatinoParentsPublicSchools.pdf>

This PowerPoint presentation summarizes critical issues in Latino parent involvement.

### **Building Partnerships with Immigrant Parents** – (Sobel & Kugler, 2007)

[http://www.embracediverseschools.com/images/Ed\\_Leadership.pdf](http://www.embracediverseschools.com/images/Ed_Leadership.pdf)

This article from Education Leadership suggests several useful strategies for building relationships with parents from diverse cultures.

### **National Council of La Raza**

<http://www.nclr.org/>

### **Preparing Young Latino Children for School Success: Best Practices in Family Engagement** (Beltran, 2012)

[http://publications.nclr.org/bitstream/handle/123456789/1096/IB\\_24\\_Family\\_Engagement.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y](http://publications.nclr.org/bitstream/handle/123456789/1096/IB_24_Family_Engagement.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y)

This Issue Brief from National Council for La Raza discusses effective practices for strengthening family-school connections among Latino families.



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## Family Engagement and Poor Families

### **Miseducating Teachers About the Poor: A Critical Analysis of Ruby Payne's Claims About Poverty**

(Bomer, Dworin, May & Semingson, 2008)

<http://www.tehamaschools.org/files/iss50/ResearchonRubyPayne.pdf>

This article examines the implications of relying on Ruby Payne's description of the poor and the implications for school personnel when they interact with families and students from poverty.

### **Family Resource Practices for Families Living in Poverty** (Smith & DeBord, 2005)

<http://ncsu.edu/ffci/publications/2005/v10-n1-2005-may/fa-1-family.php>

This paper discusses eight resources needed by poor families.

### **The Myth of the Culture of Poverty** – (Groski, 2008)

<http://tinyurl.com/3a7hsop>

This article challenges the idea that there is a “culture of poverty” and provides explicit strategies that teachers and principals can use to improve parent engagement in their school.

## Invitational Education

<http://www.invitationaleducation.net/>

This site is the home of the International Alliance for Invitational Education and includes a link to a school survey that can be used to measure how “inviting” your school may be.

This *Research into Practice* brief was prepared by Practical Leadership, LLC and authored by Ronald Williamson, Professor of Educational Leadership at Eastern Michigan University and Howard Johnston, Professor Emeritus of Secondary Education at the University of South Florida. This brief is prepared for use by principals and school staff in Oregon GEAR UP schools.

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