

Parent Involvement: The Key To Improved Student Achievement

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There is a sizable body of research literature supporting the involvement of parents in educational settings and activities. Because the existing literature base on parent involvement is large and growing, we have chosen to present only a summary of selected research findings and relevant literature in order to establish a framework underpinning the legitimacy of our parent involvement investigation. Epstein (1995) for example sets the stage by defining parent involvement as families and communities who take an active role in creating a caring educational environment. She further asserts that parents who are involved with their children's education are those who consistently demonstrate good parenting skills, communicate with the school staff, volunteer their time in the school, help their children learn at home, take an active role in school-related decision making, and who regularly collaborate with the school community. Christensen and Cleary (1990) suggest that parents' active involvement results in greater recognition of teachers' skills, better teacher evaluations from their principals, enhanced parental understanding of the inner workings of the school, and higher school ratings in effectiveness and program success. Additionally, in schools where student achievement was reported, Loucks (1992) found that parent involvement was a significant factor in both accelerated and sustained student academic performance.

While we have little argument with the general premises stated above, we wanted to know if similar improvement might be attained by inner-city elementary students (specifically third-grade students) if parents became more directly involved with their children's education. To find the answers,

we researched, planned for, implemented, and evaluated such a parent involvement program in a Chicago inner-city elementary school over two years. The program, activities, and results of this inner-city parent involvement program are reported herein.

Implementing a structured parent involvement program in an inner-city school, primarily to improve student achievement, was our central purpose. The expected outcomes included both cognitive and affective improvement in academic areas. While the need to improve student achievement on cognitive, standardized tests was essential to us, it was also important to show student improvement in the “affective” areas of educational performance. Several measurement tools were considered and utilized because using standardized test data alone takes considerable time to obtain and analyze. Less easily measured affective aspects of children’s development, such as attitude, morale, and self-esteem, were studied because there is a widely held belief that student attitudes, morale, and self-esteem impact student academic achievement almost as much as does their cognitive development (Loucks, 1992; Johnson, 1994; Jackson & Cooper, 1992).

Since other authorities (Aronson, 1996; Columbo, 1995), agreed that student achievement improved when parents became involved, it was also an important task for us to discover the extent to which these findings would be supported by our own parental involvement program investigation. Using a slightly different focus, we set out to discover what, if any, specific academic impact a parent involvement program might have on third-grade children, their parents, and the community in an inner-city school setting.

An Inner-City Parent Involvement Program

We began the program with frank discussions about ways to improve student learning with the faculty of the selected elementary school. It didn’t take long for the faculty to recognize that without increased parent support, few other ideas or resources would likely impact the learning environment as much as having parents become, in effect, extensions of the teachers and their classrooms. In short order, eight third-grade teachers agreed about the need for a parent involvement program and decided to support the concept by involving themselves in this undertaking.

In planning for our inner-city elementary school (third-grade level) parent involvement program, we first asked ourselves, then representatives from the various stakeholders (parents, teachers, students, community members) the following questions:

- Are parents, in fact, welcomed in the school?
- Can we measure with confidence the extent to which parents are involved

in their children's education?

- To what extent do parents volunteer their time in the school, and for what purposes?
- Are community businesses and organizations invited to work with the school and, if so, in what ways?
- Are parents capable of assisting teachers with instruction, and does this assistance enhance academic success?
- Do present staff development programs provide teachers with the knowledge and skills necessary to effectively incorporate parents into their children's education?
- To what extent should parents participate in instructional decisions?
- Is "school climate" affected when parents are more directly involved?
- Do parent involvement programs provide for increased access and equity for all students?

Clearly, the enthusiastic, although at times contentious, discussions surrounding these questions led to our deciding to establish the parent involvement program outlined in Epstein's (1995) framework for building parental partnerships. Because Epstein's guide highlights the importance of designing integrated social contexts which foster children's academic development, we believed that the model best suited our setting, conditions, and program goals. Specifically, Epstein summarized six effective program characteristics and guidelines for building parent partnerships:

- parenting;
- communicating;
- volunteering;
- learning at home;
- decision making; and
- collaboration with the community at large.

She suggested further that schools follow a five step implementation process:

- create an action team;
- obtain funds and other support;
- identify starting points;
- develop a three-year plan; and
- continue planning and working to improve the program.

These elements, in combination, seemed to provide the fundamentals for the parent involvement program we wished to implement. Therefore, after reviewing the literature, holding meetings with the staff, community

leaders, and selected consultants, Epstein's parent involvement model was adopted for implementation. The Local School Council (LSC) also approved the Epstein model and our implementation strategies. Additionally, in order to stay abreast of the most current practices with respect to parent involvement, the school joined the National Network of Partnership Schools (Improving School-Family-Community Connections) housed at John Hopkins University. This parent involvement model also addressed the mandates imposed by the local school needs assessment survey, the Chicago School Reform Board of Trustees, the central office administration, and accommodated the priorities of the Chicago School Reform Act of 1995.

Those directly involved in implementing the parent program included eight faculty members, the LSC, all parents of students in grade three, 175 third-grade students, and representatives from the community. To further assist in the implementation of the parent involvement program, others were called upon for assistance and included: community leaders; corporations and small businesses; colleges and universities; and the relevant regional city and community service offices on Chicago's south side.

Process and Procedures

A number of selected procedural strategies were employed as the program was implemented. Parents and the larger community were informed about the program. Next, a needs assessment survey was sent home to the parents of all third-grade students. Of the 175 students, 48% were selected to be participants in the treatment group. Committees consisting of the participating faculty, LSC members, and selected (mostly volunteer) parents developed aspects, activities, and events that would be prepared for implementation. We also believed that it was important for students to be made aware of the impending parent involvement program and to be given opportunities to express their concerns and ideas. Thus, the participating students (third-graders) were informed of the program and surveyed. They noted overwhelmingly that they would like their parents to be involved in various school activities. Included in their desires for increased parental involvement were: parent attendance at performances or athletic events; parents accompanying them on field trips; parents serving as resource persons for in- and out-of-class activities; parents helping with the school's fundraising programs; and, parents themselves taking advantage of learning opportunities offered by the school. As Epstein (1995) reminded us, if students witnessed their parents taking an active role and interest in school-related activities, improved academic achievement

was more likely.

The administration needed to be on-board as well. Bobango (1994) reinforced this belief when he found that principals who “visualize” the people who are served by the school are not only better able to define the significance of parent involvement, but can more easily and readily gain faculty input and support for such programs.

One of the most important factors, and a challenging one, was to identify activities and events that would attract parents — to cause them to want to become involved in ways that they had not previously experienced. These initial ideas were identified as a result of the needs survey, interviews with selected parents, staff and community input, literature reviews, and input from the school’s LSC and administration. They included:

- Parenting workshops (among the most popular activities)
- Gathering data and analyzing it for activity planning purposes
- Development of parent outreach training programs
- Obtaining information from the needs assessment analysis
- Planning alternative for parents with special needs
- Seeking funding for additional program implementation
- Establishing open houses (in-school and throughout the community)
- Hosting family nights (meet your child’s teacher at the public library; family nights at the school where parents had the opportunity to utilize school library and the computer lab with their children)
- Creating popular nutrition workshops
- Promoting parent discussion groups
- Rabbit Ears Radio activity
- Parent-oriented newsletters and communication activities
- Student organized skits (for and with parent involvement)

Among the most popular activities were the various parent workshops. Parents were given the opportunity to learn how to construct a story with their children. Because reading is such a key academic component, we were particularly interested in following student progress in this area. In addition to providing greater interest, this activity also helped to enhance their child’s creative writing skills. The parents were also provided with techniques designed to assist them in helping their children successfully complete homework assignments. Parents were also taught the techniques of reading with their children, which allowed for in-depth discussions about the stories they read together. Parent workshops in art were also conducted so that parents could better understand methods of teaching reading through art. This also gave the parents an understanding of some of the ways in which the curriculum is integrated. By creating art projects, for example, students could also develop their writing skills, a benefit

which would later contribute to their required language arts needs and reading skills.

Parent volunteers were recruited from those who participated in the multiple parent involvement workshops. Through these volunteers, a parent patrol was established to assist the staff with student supervision outside of the school building during the early mornings, after school, and in the lunchroom. Parents also volunteered to assist in classrooms and in the school's central office. Due to this volunteer activity, it also became easier to obtain parent chaperones to accompany classes on field trips. Even school fundraising became more interesting for parents because they now had a better sense of both the need for and the benefits from such activity.

In order for the program to have continuity, it was important to establish activities that would create an atmosphere conducive to school-home communication, as well as to better "connect" teachers, parents, and students. After having interviewed fifty principals in Southern Illinois, Loucks (1992) discovered that parents, when asked, could indeed identify the kinds of help they wanted. They asked for more frequent notes or phone calls from teachers, increased opportunities for one-on-one interaction between the teacher and themselves, opportunities for parent/teacher problem solving, assistance in understanding instructional strategies, and how they could help their children improve the quality of homework assignments, classroom work, and behavior as they also relate to academic success. Moreover, Loucks, as a result of his findings, identified ten strategies for improving communications and stakeholder relationships:

- parent/student switch days
- parent/student fundraising
- teacher/parent roundtable discussions
- parent/teacher organizations
- newsletters
- solicitation of parent volunteers
- alumni events
- invitational events
- good news cards
- parent classes (i.e. parenting, homework, communication)

In further supporting the need for close teacher/parent relationships, so vital to successful parent involvement programs, Rosenthal and Sawyers (1996) presented a collaborative, solution-based approach that teachers could use to attract parents' cooperation in creating effective, family-friendly schools. They found that barriers to effective and collaborative educational systems included a lack of teacher preparation in systemic interpersonal

skills, a lack of family-friendly school programs, and teacher difficulties in focusing on family and educational strengths. In addition, Thompson (1993), utilizing eight member schools of the League of Schools Reaching Out, found that given patience, hard work, supportive leadership, and informed facilitation, the two streams of parent and teacher empowerment *can* come together for improved student academic achievement. Referring to Green (1992) in her opinion on Chicago School Reform, Thompson suggested that the professionalism of teachers in contrast to parents and community members who have not been formally trained as educators “is bound to provide an underlying tension in the reform process” (Green, 1992, p. 13-14). Staff development activities took on new relevance once teachers better understood the seriousness of teacher/parent relationships.

Pertinent Outcomes for the Parent Involvement Program

Without a structured parent involvement program that addressed specific areas of parent and teacher concerns, parents would likely continue their rather minimal involvement in school-related activities. Why shouldn't they? Most parents do not get seriously involved, yet their children, seemingly, “make it through the system.” We were not satisfied with this status quo condition, thus, two important outcomes became increasingly essential: (1) to increase the number of parents who would become directly involved with their children's education, and (2) to determine the general significance and academic impact of such involvement. With these two outcomes at the top of our list, we also sought to measure several others:

- achievement and in-school participation would rise
- attendance patterns would improve
- self-esteem would be greater and more in evidence
- discipline referrals would decline
- parents would be more supportive of teachers and of learning
- community “togetherness” would be enhanced
- the program would gain in popularity and in salience

Results

Clearly, those who gained the most through the implementation of the parent involvement program were the students, demonstrated by improved academic achievement. Third grade reading achievement improved by 4 months as measured by the ITBS. Reading grade equivalent mean scores increased from a gain of 2 years, 7 months in 1995 to 3 years, 1 month in 1998. Student achievement in both reading and vocabulary increased.

Vocabulary grade equivalent mean scores increased from a gain of 2 years, 4 months in 1995 to 3 years, 1 month in 1998. Third graders performed below grade level, on average, in reading and vocabulary achievement on the ITBS between 1995 and 1997. Results indicated significant improvement, specifically in reading, for the treatment group (students whose parents participated in the parent involvement program) as compared with students whose parents did not participate. Similar results existed in vocabulary improvement for the treatment group. Other academic achievement tests also demonstrated improvement; one reading mastery test showed an 85% gain.

The number of parents participating in the program grew over the two-year period from 5% in 1996 to 48% in 1998 (the period during and following implementation of our parent involvement program). In addition, participating parents reported three very significant outcomes for them as parents: (1) their interest in and appreciation for education, teachers, and learning did, in fact increase; (2) the level of interest their children had in school improved as did their attitudes about school and about their teachers; and (3) parents' respect for the role of teachers and for the impact they have on children changed dramatically. With respect to several of the other anticipated outcomes, the following evidence is noteworthy:

- increased participation in school activities such as basketball, social center events, and the Lighthouse Program
- improved attendance patterns as attested to by teachers' monthly summaries (from 88% to 92%)
- enhanced self-esteem as reported by teachers and parents
- decrease in the number of discipline referrals, as recorded by teachers, as well as by those logged in the school's central office; from 15 (19.4%) in 1996 to 10 referrals (9.0%) in 1998.

Additionally, parents took a renewed interest in learning, both for themselves and for their children. The parent volunteer program, for example, increased in number of active participants by 43% during the two-year implementation period. Parents also assisted in making contacts with community leaders in obtaining their valuable assistance with school-related programs and academic achievement initiatives. The community as a whole, as they became aware of this new partnership, took more interest in the school by helping with and supporting activities such as sports programs, community clean-ups, and by providing other classroom-related assistance, expertise, and resources. Indeed, the foundation had been provided for expanding the program to other grade-level students and parents.

Conclusions and Recommendations

The inner-city parent involvement program began through a needs assessment survey. It provided valuable information for us, the school's faculty and staff, the LSC members, and parents with clear understandings about the need for parental involvement. It also pointed the directions for both short and long term goals and objectives. Moreover, the survey provided indications of growing parent concerns about their children, their children's' education, as well as an appreciation for teachers who, on a daily basis, are in positions to influence, guide, and provide for their children's education.

It is our belief, based on the success of this endeavor, the time, effort, and commitment required from all stakeholders to build a strong parental involvement program is indeed offset by the improvement in students' academic performance and attitude toward learning. It is essential that the model selected be adapted to the needs of the particular school, parents, and community. Further study of the relationship and importance assigned to parent involvement programs (i.e., the impact of those parents participating versus those declining to become involved) should be conducted. Ongoing staff development is very important as teachers engage parents and community leaders. A review of school and district policies and procedures when recruiting parents and community leaders is helpful and connotes district as well as school level support and interest. We further recommend joining a network of schools such as the National Network of Partnership Schools. The training and orientation provided will benefit a school or district through networking with other schools and personnel. It is also helpful to obtain related guides and parent involvement materials, such training manuals, as most consist of detailed plans, strategies, and suggestions for program implementation.

There were, of course, several program inhibitors. For example, there was the absence of an adequate budget; facility limitations which narrowed the number and scope of activities; and, a lack of available time for teachers and activity development. Implementing several of the programs was constrained because funding from outside sources was unavailable or too difficult to acquire in a timely manner. Time commitments on the part of parents made it difficult for some to attend in-school activities, especially during the daytime. We recommend attention to these matters as other schools and leaders consider similar programs. Still, even with these inhibitors, the program was never in jeopardy. If hindsight is any measure, the only serious mistake we made was not implementing a structured parent involvement program years ago.

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