

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

According to a new review of recent research published by the Southwest Educational Development Laboratory, students with involved parents, no matter what their income or background, are more likely to:

- Earn higher grades and test scores, and enroll in higher-level programs
- Be promoted, pass their classes and earn credits
- Attend school regularly
- Have better social skills, show improved behavior and adapt well to school
- Graduate and go on to post-secondary education

Furthermore, studies show that families of all income and education levels, and from all ethnic and cultural groups, are engaged in supporting their children's learning at home. White, middle-class families, however, tend to be more involved at school. Supporting more involvement at school from all families may be an important strategy for addressing the achievement gap.

Programs and special efforts to engage families make a difference For example, teacher outreach to parents results in strong, consistent gains in student performance in both reading and math. Effective outreach practices include meeting face to face, sending learning materials home, and keeping in touch about progress. Workshops for parents on helping their children at home are linked to higher reading and math scores. Schools with highly rated partnership programs make greater gains on state tests than schools with lower-rated programs.

Higher performing schools effectively involve families and community Schools that succeed in engaging families from diverse backgrounds share three key practices:

- Focus on building trusting, collaborative relationships among teachers, families and community members
- Recognize, respect and address families' needs, as well as class and cultural differences
- Embrace a philosophy of partnership where power and responsibility are shared

Parent and community organizing efforts are improving schools This type of engagement, which is based outside schools and led by parents and community members, is growing nationwide. Aimed mainly at low-performing schools, strategies of community organizing are openly focused on building low-income families' power and political skills. Unlike traditional parent involvement, parent and community organizing intends to hold schools accountable for results.

Recent studies have found that community organizing contributed to these changes in schools:

- upgraded school facilities
- improved school leadership and staffing
- higher quality learning programs for students
- new resources and programs to improve teaching and curriculum

- new funding for after-school programs and family supports

In Short When parents talk to their children about school, expect them to do well, help them plan for college, and make sure that out-of-school activities are constructive, their children do better in school. When schools engage families in ways that are linked to improving learning, and support parent involvement at home and school, students make greater gains. When schools build partnerships with families that respond to their concerns, honor their contributions, and share power, they succeed in sustaining connections that are aimed at improving student achievement. And when families and communities organize to hold poorly performing schools accountable, school districts make positive changes in policy, practice, and resources.

How Can Schools, Families and Community Groups Put these Findings into Action?

- Recognize that all parents, regardless of income, education or cultural background, are involved in their children's learning and want their children to do well.
- Design programs that will support families to guide their children's learning, from preschool through high school.
- Develop the capacity of school staff and families to work together.
- Link efforts to engage families, whether based at school or in the community, to student learning.
- Build families' social and political connections.
- Embrace a philosophy of partnership and be willing to share power. Focus on developing trusting and respectful relationships. Make sure that parents, school staff, and community members understand that the responsibility for children's educational development is a collaborative enterprise.
- Build strong connections between schools and community organizations.
- Include families in all strategies to reduce the achievement gap between white, middle-class students and low-income students and students of color.

From *A New Generation of Evidence: The Family is Critical to Student Achievement*, by Anne T. Henderson and Nancy Berla (Washington, DC: Center for Law and Education, 1994) and *A New Wave of Evidence: The Impact of School, Family and Community Connections on Student Achievement*, by Anne T. Henderson and Karen L. Mapp (Austin, TX: Southwest Educational Development Laboratory, 2002).