

Creating Parent/School Partnerships

My first assignment as a high school teacher was at my alma mater. I had quit my job as a worker's compensation adjuster and moved back to my hometown. Because I had taken some education courses and done substitute teaching, I decided to call my old high school to inquire if any positions were available. It was several months into the school year, so I knew the chances were minimal. To my surprise, there was an opening. To make a long story short, I signed my first contract as a teacher on my birthday. I was feeling optimistic until I was told: "You're going to have problems with your junior class," and "Watch out for some of the parents; they can be a real pain." This same attitude toward parents was apparent in my second teaching assignment at an urban high school in southern California.

I found that returning to my old school as a teacher was both a blessing and a detriment. On the down side, parents I had known as a high school student remembered my antics as a teenager. Naturally, they called my principal to inquire about me. When the principal told me of their concerns, I said, "If they wish to talk to me, please give them my phone number." The blessing was that this helped me understand the benefits of parental involvement for K-12 students and their classrooms.

A Short History

During my childhood, I knew my parents would participate in school activities such as open houses, parties, and ball games. They volunteered for yard duty and even chaperoned numerous outings. The teachers and administrators knew and respected them. In graduate school, as I began to re-search parental involvement in schools, I was reminded of my colleagues' negative reactions to

Returning to my old school as a teacher . . . helped me understand the benefits of parental involvement for K-12 students and their classrooms.

having parents participate in their children's education. I began to wonder if my parents had been an anomaly.

However, I believed that despite teachers' negative impressions, parents do want to be involved and can make a contribution. Educators just need to find ways to invite them in. I began searching for evidence to support my hunch. I found two respected researchers who supported my theory—Joyce Epstein and James Conner.¹ They have documented ways that schools can involve parents in their children's education. In this article, I will share some practical strategies for accomplishing this goal.

Joyce Epstein

Joyce Epstein helped establish the Center on Families, Communities, Schools, and Children's Learning at Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore, Maryland. One of her many contributions in the field of parental involvement is a "six-type" framework for high schools, which seeks to help build stronger partnerships among schools, the community, and families. Epstein's six types of involvement include the following:

Type 1—Parenting/Adolescent Development

This refers to parents' awareness of adolescent behavior and their own parenting skills, and of schools' understanding of the families of their students. Activities include home visits, family support groups, referrals for special services or social services, information shared with parents about teens and their development, and parenting skills for teens.

Type 2—Communicating

This refers to communication between school and home. Activities include the sharing of information on students' progress through report cards, memos, and conferences; newsletters;

BY A. Y. "FRED" RAMIREZ

Schools can bridge the gap between themselves and their students' homes in numerous ways.

telephone, mail, and electronic communications; as well as tours for incoming or future students; summer and fall orientation for students and parents; and back-to-school nights.

Type 3—Volunteering

This involves encouraging parents and other community members to attend school events and volunteer for activities. They can help other parents get involved by becoming mentors for students and volunteering to call

parents regarding their children's attendance.

Type 4—Learning Activities at Home

This relates mainly to encouraging parental participation in homework, classwork, and curricular-related interactions and decisions. Other options include teaching parents to help their children set goals and select courses, involving parents in their children's choice of a college, and in offering career transition programs. Teachers, administrators, community workers, and other agencies can cooperate in this process. The school counselor can set up a time and date for parents to ask about college. Parents can be invited when college recruiters visit the school campus. Also, local businesses and universities can partner with schools to inform parents about the criteria for employment and admission into a university.

Type 5—Decision-Making

This refers to parental and community in-

volvement in advisory, decision-making, or advocacy roles through parent associations, school improvement groups, and school site councils.

Type 6—Collaborating With the Community

Schools, families, and students can be encouraged to participate in any community organization or institution that shares responsibility for young people's development, including workshops on community resources, community-service activities for students, school-linked health programs, and business school partnerships.²

Epstein's framework shows that parental involvement in schools is multi-dimensional. Schools can bridge the gap between themselves and their students' homes in numerous ways.

As Epstein applied her model in urban, rural, and suburban schools, she found that when schools establish a "trust fund" using her six categories, educational personnel

Picture
Removed

begin to examine their interactions with parents. To help schools evaluate their practices in these areas, Epstein developed a survey that identifies the needs of teachers, students, and families in regard to parental involvement.³ This survey has attracted other researchers who are interested in the issue of parental involvement and has been administered throughout the U.S. in a variety of schools.⁴ Using the survey, Epstein has helped students, teachers, and parents conduct more meaningful discussions regarding the role of parents in the school environment.

James Comer

James Comer, associate dean of the Yale University School of Medicine,⁵ developed the School Development Program to improve the educational experience of low-income minority youth. The program seeks to support the agents with the most at stake within a school:

parents, community members, teachers, children, and school staff.⁶ In 1968, Comer and a team of mental-health professionals—a psychiatrist, a social worker, a psychologist, and a special-education teacher—began to work with New Haven, Connecticut, public schools. At the beginning of the study, one school in which they worked ranked 32nd out of 33 schools on standardized tests, but by 1984 it had tied for third in academic achievement among the 26 schools in the city.⁷ The team's work led to the "Comer Principle" of education, which has been adopted by more than 250 schools throughout the U.S.

James Comer's philosophy is based on his own upbringing and the contribution of his parents and others to his life.⁸ He believes in the African proverb that "it takes a whole village to raise a child." According to Comer, children's most meaningful learning occurs through positive and supportive relationships

According to James Comer, children's most meaningful learning occurs through positive and supportive relationships with caring and nurturing adults.

with caring and nurturing adults. He sees parents as a child's first teachers, who should be actively involved in their children's development.

Comer believes that parents, school staff, and community members, regardless of position, can make an important contribution to improving students' education. However, in order to bring out the best in children, adults must interact more collaboratively and responsibly with one another on behalf of the younger generation.⁹

In the Comer Principle, children form the center of an educational cluster. The adults around them work together to ensure that the environment respects and fosters intellectual and social growth. To accomplish this, Comer uses three teams: (1) the school planning and management team, (2) the mental-health team, and (3) the parent group. The school planning team, with the principal as its head, consists of teachers, administrators, parents, support staff, and a child-development specialist. They target and identify areas for social and academic improvement, establish guidelines, develop school plans, respond to problems, and monitor activities. The mental-health team includes social workers and psychologists who analyze social and behavioral patterns within the school to find solutions to recurring problems and to apply child-development principles in decision-making. The parent group focuses on including and involving parents in all levels of school activity—from volunteering in the classroom to governance.¹⁰

By implementing the Comer Principle, a number of schools have increased student academic success, social skills, and atten-

Picture
Removed

Teachers often have overt or assumed expectations of parents.

dance. As they work together harmoniously, teachers and parents contribute to young people's academic success and open the doors to a more positive experience for students and the school community.

Unfortunately, only one-third of the schools in the Comer program have achieved these positive outcomes. Comer believes that the problem rests with teacher education, which may not (1) adequately prepare teachers to understand child development and psychology or (2) teach them how to make parents partners in their children's education.

Practical Ways to Involve Parents

Teachers often have overt or assumed expectations of parents. These can include the following:

1. Parents will show up for meetings.
2. Parents will read and respond to no-

tices that are sent home.

3. Parents will share vital information about their child with the teacher.

4. Parents will get involved in the classroom.

5. Parents will show interest in what their child is studying and will try to find ways to enhance what he or she learns.

6. Parents will respect teachers as professionals.

Here are some reasons why parents may not meet teachers' expectations:

1. Parents will show up for meetings:

"I do not feel respected by [my son's] teachers. I avoid meetings because all she does is tell me what I am not doing with Eduardo. I have five children; I do not like to feel like one of them."

2. Parents will read and respond to notices that are sent home:

From students: "Our parents don't come because they don't know any English. We don't even tell them when they are supposed to come. They dress so different that we don't want them to come because the others will laugh and tease us. We are ashamed."

3. Parents will share vital information about their child with the teacher.

From parents: "My family's business is private." "I don't see how this all affects him at school."

4. Parents will get involved in the classroom.

From parents: "Even when I try to get involved and ask if I can come in [to work], the teacher always tells me that I am not needed." "When I do come in, all I do is file and make copies . . . as a former Peace Corps volunteer, I would think my experience would count for something educational for students . . . but the teacher has never asked about my background."

5. Parents will show interest in what their child is studying and will try to find ways to enhance what he or she learns.

From parents: "Of course I try to work with my child. . . . However, at times I do not know what [the class is] doing. I graduated from college but majored in history, not chemistry." "Since my English is poor, it is difficult for me to understand anything that comes from school. So, it is difficult for me to help my child."

6. Parents will respect teachers as professionals.

From parents: "How can we respect

Picture
Removed

teachers when they don't show up for Open House?" "Yes, they do a good job [of teaching], but they also need to know that I am not a child. They shouldn't speak to me as if I were a child."

These are only a few comments made by parents and students regarding parental involvement. From this, we can see that miscommunication and lack of school-home communication produces mistrust and misunderstandings. Included are some ways that I used as a parochial and urban public high school teacher to encourage better school and home communication:

- *Contact every parent within the first two weeks of school.* Is this possible if you have a large number of students? Yes! A principal I know made personal contacts with every child in his school of 2,300 students. He knew every name and at least one unique quality about each student. Parents would love to hear from you. Be sure to make the first call positive. Try to think of one engaging attribute about the child before you call, and mention this to the parents.
- *See each student and parent as an in-*

Miscommunication and lack of school-home communication produces mistrust and misunderstandings.

dividual. Don't make assumptions based on culture, socio-economic or educational level, or gender.

- *Communicate in ways parents will understand.* If you need a translator, try to recruit another parent to assist.
- *All parents have one or more skills (cultural capital).* Ask for input and try to incorporate their talents into the curriculum. I did this as a history teacher. A parent who felt he had nothing to share came in and spoke about "surviving the '60s." It was the best lesson of the unit.

- *Many parents help initiate involvement.* In some cultures, the parents feel they are being disrespectful if they ask questions or come to school. Send individualized invitations to parents and follow up with telephone calls.

- *Provide a variety of options for teacher/parent meetings,* in addition to Back to School Night, which often is scheduled for a Wednesday or Thursday night when parents are working, have transportation issues, daycare issues, etc. Or, offer daycare during the meeting. Our child-development high school students took charge of daycare during Open House.

- *Periodically survey parents about their attitudes toward the school.*
- *Help parents to work with their children.* For instance, provide specific guidance on overseeing homework.
- *Inform parents promptly about their children's academic progress.* Teachers often wait until report-card time to contact parents about failing grades. A single parent was in a car accident and spent four months in the hospital. She never received word that

Picture
Removed

Teachers and schools can do a great deal to create positive parent/guardian and school partnerships.

her eldest daughter's grades had slipped from an "A" to a "D" during that time.

• *Throughout the year, tell parents positive things about their children.* When I called a parent about his child's grade going from a "D" to a "C," the parent seemed confused. He had expected me to say something negative. The next day at school, many of my students begged me to call home. They wanted to work hard, so I would tell their parents.

• *Invite parents to participate in leadership councils.* Often, the PTO/PTA is only advisory. Allow parents to make decisions. This will give them ownership.

• *Establish bilingual hotlines for parents, and send home bilingual messages.*

• *Welcome parents who visit the classroom.*

• *Respond to telephone calls from parents on the same day you receive them.*

• *Publish a school newsletter.* Involve parents and community in its production and distribution.

• *Hold regularly scheduled student performances, science demonstrations, literature readings, art presentations, historical vignettes, and physical-fitness demonstrations* to highlight what is being taught at the school.

• *Offer parenting classes and other types of courses desired by school families.* Parents want to know what their child is learning. When schools provide this information, parents and students can work together more effectively.

• *Provide staff-development training for working with parents.* Often, the staff person is the first to welcome a parent. First impressions are vital for improved school-home relations.

• *Provide a forum where parents feel comfortable expressing their concerns.*

• *Encourage parents to communicate with their child's teachers on a regular*

A. Y. "Fred" Ramirez with his son, Alexander.

basis.

• *Work with parents to develop an ongoing, well-planned parent involvement action plan.*

When you think about parents, remember that this may include many types of families, not just biological parents who are married and raising their own children. Often, our students are living with a stepparent or guardian—grandparents, uncles and aunts, foster parents, etc. Don't presume your student has two parents living at home. Therefore, don't assume that sending a letter home means that you will be making an appointment with two parents. If the parents have divorced or separated, they probably do not want to be in the same room with each other. Make two appointments. Although inconvenient for you, this is often best for the child.

As you can see, teachers and schools can do a great deal to create positive parent/guardian and school partnerships. Ask yourself, "What would I want from my children's teachers if I were a parent?" Keeping in mind that parents and teachers may come from different backgrounds and have different expectations will help us bridge the home-school gap.

Parents/guardians do wish to be involved in their child's education, and they do care. I often heard my colleagues from the Catholic high school and the urban public high school say that parents "do not care." After stepping back from my role as a teacher to interview teachers and parents, I found that parents desire the best for their child. As educators, we must take the first step to reach out and include parents in the education of their children. ☞

Pictures
Removed

Dr. A. Y. "Fred" Ramirez is an Assistant Professor of Education at California State University Fullerton, where he is the Field Co-ordinator for the Santa Ana Professional Development District and course chair for the Multicultural Education Course. His research interests include school-community partnerships, parental/guardian involvement, rethinking multicultural education, school reform, and teacher education. He can be reached by E-mail at framirez@fullerton.edu.

REFERENCES

1. James P. Comer, "Parent Participation in the Schools," *Pbi Delta Kappan* 67:6 (February 1986), pp. 442-446; Joyce Epstein, "Perspectives and Previews on Research and Policy for School, Family, and Community Partnerships." In Alan Booth and Judith Dunn, eds., *Family-School Links: How Do They Affect Educational Outcomes?* (Mahwah, N.J.: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1996).
2. John Hollified, "High Schools Gear up to Create Effective School and Family Partnerships," *New Schools, New Communities* 11:2 (Winter 1995), pp. 26-31.
3. Joyce Epstein, *High School and Family Partnerships: Surveys and Summaries. Questionnaires for Teachers, Parents, and Students, and How to Summarize Your High School's Data* (Baltimore, Md.: Center on Families, Communities, School, and Children's Learning, 1993).
4. Janet Chrispeels. *Home-School Partnership Survey: Teacher, Student, Parents*. Unpublished manuscript. University of California, Santa Barbara (November 1994); A. Y. "Fred" Ramirez, *Teachers' Attitudes Toward Parental Involvement: Looking Within a Rural Secondary School*. Paper presented at the American Educational Researcher Association Conference on "Talking Together in Educational Research and Practice," Chicago, Illinois (March 24-28, 1997).
5. James P. Comer, M.D.; School Development Program, Yale Child Study Center (November 2000). Available at: <http://info.med.yale.edu/comer/comer.html>.
6. Jacquelyn Zimmermann, ed., *The Comer School Development Program*. Office of Research, Office of Educational Research and Improvement (OERI). *Education Consumer Guide No. 6*. U.S. Department of Education (September 1993). Available at: <http://www.ed.gov/pubs/OR/ConsumerGuide/comer.html>.
7. Comer, "Parent Participation in Schools," *Pbi Delta Kappan*, p. 445.
8. Carole Novak, "Interview With James P. Comer, M.D.," *Technos Quarterly for Education and Technology* 1:4 (Winter 1992). Available at: <http://www.technos.net/journal/volume1/4comer.htm>.
9. School Development Program, Yale Study Center, *Program Overview* (November 2000). Available at: <http://info.med.yale.edu/comer/verview.html>.
10. Zimmerman.