Providing the Backdrop for the Issue

Parent involvement is important for student learning, not only in our public schools but in our private and charter schools as well (Henderson et al. 2004). Parent involvement promotes better student attendance, increased graduation rates and less grade retention, higher parent and student satisfaction with school, less discipline reports, and higher achievement scores in reading and math (Hiatt-Michael 2001). The importance of parental involvement was accentuated by the 2001 No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB), which holds our nation’s schools accountable for academic achievement for all students. Parents, teachers, and teacher preparation institutions need to know this law, its accountability provisions, and its benchmarks, which set achievement standards for all students. Parent involvement has teeth; no longer can schools pay lip service to this involvement because parents have the right to know what is happening in schools. Their right to know has been formalized through this legislation (Henderson et al. 2004).

Teachers will readily admit that they have had very little training, if any, working with parents (see Baker et al. 1999). Even today, there is limited professional development at the school or district levels that incorporates the importance of the role of parents and how classroom professionals can harness this parental power as a means of improving and sustaining student learning (Hiatt-Michael 2001; Sharrtrand, Kreider, and Erickson-Warfield 1994). These barriers to effective parent involvement have been credited to a school environment that does not value the view and participation of parents or to parent roles that go beyond the traditional roles of parent support in schools. Parents may also not be encouraged to participate in school activities, especially if teachers perceived parents as not experienced or knowledgeable enough for tasks. These barriers are coupled with changing demographics that place parents with economic demands that limit time that parents are available to come to school. Finally, a lack of teacher preparation in regard to parent involvement in the classroom raises another barrier to effective parent involvement (Sharrtrand et al. 1994).

In an analysis of teacher training programs, researchers found that teacher candidates receive minimal training in parental involvement concepts and strategies (Hiatt-Michael 2001). This finding is often accentuated by graduates who are asked to evaluate the various aspects of their training programs. They usually give glowing comments about the courses in which they learned subject matter content, but unanimously agree that they needed more training in classroom management techniques, parent communication, and parent involvement in the classroom strategies. Through their field experiences and internships, secondary teacher candidates have witnessed first-hand minimal parent involvement in the secondary schools. These teacher candidates will join the ranks of those already teaching and yet not know how to make their classrooms parent-friendly, how to inform parents about what is really happening in the classroom, or how to talk with parents without using teacher language. Overall, they will not have gleaned strategies on how to make parents feel and believe that they are truly collaborative partners in learning.

The picture is further muddled by parent involvement initiatives in many school districts. In one district, for example, there were seven parent involvement...
groups in operation and these groups did not communicate with one another. Parents at several schools in the district completed four parent surveys during the school year from four different parent involvement groups, and it was not until several parents complained that they had answered the same questions four times did the district become aware of the situation.

The state of parent involvement that has been created in response to NCLB legislation and the need for preservice and in-service teachers to become more active partners with parents has created the need for this initiative.

**The Purpose of the Study**

This study grew out of a need to provide preservice teachers with a clearer awareness of the inner workings of parent involvement. What we were teaching were reactionary strategies: how to handle the “difficult” parent; how to deal with the parent from a diverse culture, how to keep parents happy with meaningless information. These inadequate, reactionary “how to” strategies did not show the teacher candidates how parents can have meaningful participation in their children’s learning in the classroom. We concluded that our teacher candidates have to learn not to fear parent involvement but to embrace it, because it is only through that involvement that they will be great teachers.

A second need was to link our preservice teachers to meaningful practicum experiences involving parent involvement with in-service teachers who used parents effectively in the classroom. It became quickly apparent that teachers also lacked parent involvement awareness. Teachers voiced apprehension about having parents in their classrooms and several believed that did not know how to use parents as partners on activities other than copying ditto's or setting up classroom materials for projects.

The third finding came from insights gained by serving on four district-wide and community parent involvement groups. One group collected substantial data on parent involvement in the district, while a second conducted a survey on the level of “parent-friendly” environmental aspects in several schools. Another group conducted a survey of principals about their perception of parent involvement, while the fourth group brought in a Hispanic parent involvement expert to train Hispanic parents on effective parenting. While these were all excellent initiatives, no group shared its findings with any of the other groups.

The purpose of this study is to learn through a case study method of how connections were made among all these groups. By making connections, the preservice teacher preparation program was linked to the in-service teacher-parent involvement activities. The parent involvement teams used their expertise to help develop the preservice—in-service program and in doing so, shared their findings.

In our department, we transformed a preexisting course, "Child, Family, School Connections," to help teacher candidates understand the power of parent involvement in the learning of their students. The course was structured on the work of recent researchers (such as Baker et al. 1999; Epstein and Jansorn 2004) and first-hand experiences of community agencies (such as the African-American Men's Association) and school organizations (such as the PTA). Rather than focusing on reactionary "how to's," candidates learn effective parenting strategies and their role as teachers in the community helping all parents to have meaningful engagement in the schools. Teacher candidates are required to put together a parent toolkit which they share with one another and with teachers who work with them in their field experiences. These toolkits help the teacher candidates as well as their mentor teachers be actively involved in learning how to bring parents together, to engage parents at home during homework time, to make the classrooms and school activities student/parent centered, to provide parents with real governance opportunities, and to know the many leadership roles available in their communities.

**Structuring the Course**

"Child, Family, School Connections" was introduced as a summer online course and made available for elementary and secondary teacher candidates. Among the teacher candidates who signed up, ten were returning, after previous careers outside of education, to qualify for a teaching certificate. At first, the enrolled candidates were reluctant to discuss issues online. In the beginning, online courses tend to make students shy and hesitant to participate. Initially, they based their insights about parent involvement from their limited experiences and observations as parents and from their personal field experiences. The first question, "What is your definition of parent involvement?", opened up a flood gate discussion of "Who are the parents in today's family?" Participants also asked, "What is the meaning of involvement?" and "What constitutes levels of involvement?" By the end of the first discussion period (three weeks on electronic dialoguing), it was very apparent that the candidates had lost their inhibitions and bonded and interacted with each other to discuss their questions and issues. This togetherness carried forward and permeated the discussions that led to the completion of the final class project—the Parent Toolkit.

The objective of preparing a Parent Toolkit was clear and straightforward: to develop a set of activities that link parents to their school and community. The assignment was modeled after Joyce Epstein's work (Epstein et al. 2002), which outlined six frameworks of parent involvement. Epstein, of John Hopkins University, passionately asserts that parents, students, and teachers can be involved together in a meaningful way. Each frame-
work, she says, is important because it brings parents into a meaningful link with their school which provides the foundation stone for a positive outcome for their children. "There are many reasons for developing school, family, and community partnerships. The main reason to create such partnerships is to help all youngsters succeed in school and in later life" (Epstein 2001, 600).

Let's look at the six frameworks and how the students reacted to each and prepared their strategies to make these frameworks happen.

Teacher candidates in the revised course, who had no experience with the joys and tribulations of parenthood, found it difficult to grasp all of the nuances of the first framework: parenting. The task of understanding all of the dimensions of this framework appeared to be a daunting task. One student wrote, "being able to provide for one's child and at the same time, be a productive member of society is a challenge." In their discussions of this first framework, the candidates unanimously agreed that parents must be very careful not to lose themselves emotionally, physically, and mentally as they seek to wear the many different hats needed to meet all the demands of their children in school. The school must provide support for these parents, but often the support is not there. To fill this void, one candidate suggested that the school provide a Parent Time Place (PTP), a dedicated space in the school where parents could meet with each other or with representatives from community agencies. Pamphlets and bulletins regarding school events, policies, and upcoming projects would be available in the PTP. This haven in the school would also serve as a place where parents can sign out books, magazines, videos, and CDs on topics of interest: for example, parenting tips, communication skills and strategies, and the challenges of raising children in today's nanotechnology world. The center would be open in the evening and during the day when school is in session. The brainstorming about this idea also brought out the need for parent support programs in the community; the public library, the local churches, and any of the adolescent clubs. When parents spend time in schools on a regular basis, their presence reinforces the idea in their children's minds that school and home are interconnected and symbiotic. School becomes an integral part of family life in the home (Griffith 1998).

Through their readings and discussion groups, the teacher candidates found that the second framework, communication, involves parents in the school through meaningful discourse and two-way communication. In a school with an established two-way communication network, the information gap that often exists between families and schools no longer permeates the communication cycle. They also learned that their own communication practices influence parents' ability and eagerness to be involved with school activities (Mendoza 2003). The school-community grapevine ceases to grow and flourish because parents have first-hand information that is truthful and complete.

To make this second framework farther reaching, a teacher candidate suggested a parent pamphlet, "Key to Communication," as a way to quickly locate essential phone numbers, Web sites, e-mail addresses, and hotline numbers to provide communication links with teachers, support personnel, and administrators. Students noted that the use of the Internet by parents from all walks of life is increasing each day. As the cost of technology, cable, and DSL access becomes less expen-

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Framework</th>
<th>Definition</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Parenting</td>
<td>Help all families establish home environments to support children as students.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communicating</td>
<td>Design effective forms of school-to-home and home-to-school communications about school programs and children's progress.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Volunteering</td>
<td>Recruit and organize parent help and support.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learning at home</td>
<td>Provide information and ideas to families about how to help students at home with homework and other curriculum-related activities, decisions, and planning.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Decision making</td>
<td>Include parents in school decisions, developing parent leaders and representatives.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Collaborating with the community</td>
<td>Identify and integrate resources and services from the community to strengthen school programs, family practices, and students' learning and development.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
sive, parents are making technology an integral part of the family budget. Teachers find this type of communication beneficial because it is direct and instantaneous. Teachers and parents often use chat forums to discuss school-based issues ranging from school events to student grades and discipline issues. Through their field experiences, teacher candidates learned that one issue often brought up by parents who use the Internet is that many teachers do not read their e-mails on a daily basis. This can be very disconcerting, especially if there is an issue deemed important by the parent. This framework of communication also requires parents to provide the school and teachers with at least three telephone numbers where parents can be contacted. School personnel unanimously agree on how difficult it is to find and contact parents when there is an emergency. Also included in this framework are parent examples in the home and at school of communicating through questioning and conversation, demonstrating that achievement comes from working hard.

Epstein’s third framework is volunteering. Volunteering in a school is commonly understood as when a parent comes in during school hours to help out in the classroom, office, or wherever the parent is needed. Today, it is difficult to find parent volunteers during the day because in most households both parents work. Parents, however, can still be called volunteers without being physically present in the school. A parent could provide volunteer support by sharing photographs, a story, or other ideas about their culture, or provide a craft project idea. The parent is considered a volunteer because he or she is actively supporting learning. This is not the usual understanding of parent involvement; that is why it is important that teacher practitioners and student teachers know and acknowledge this more expansive understanding of parental involvement. How can this new idea of parent involvement be better understood? One teacher candidate suggested that it might be helpful to have the teacher write an explanation of what it means to be a volunteer and the many ways that a parent can support the classroom. Other suggestions centered on the development of a classroom committee of parents who would use the teacher’s explanation and suggestions to develop other nontraditional ways for parents to be involved. This committee could also design a workshop to help parents understand the school’s expectations for volunteering. Parents who volunteer in the classroom need structure. Some parents tend to help too much and others tend to stand back and do little to support classroom activities. Parents and teachers need to learn how to work cooperatively and effectively. Too often parents feel neglected and under-appreciated. Many teachers believe that having parents in the classroom hinders their teaching and is the cause of more work; however, parents who have a good understanding of their role in the classroom understand teachers’ needs. These parents are invaluable and can be the mentors for other parent volunteers. Researchers (see Eagle 1989) have concluded that parent involvement during the school day had the most significant positive impact on student achievement of the factors studied.

From an analysis of over twenty-five hundred studies on learning, Walberg (Walberg 1986 in Eagle 1989) concluded that an academically stimulating home environment is one of the chief determinants of learning. From over twenty-nine studies completed within the last decade, he found commonalities in what students are learning by what was supported by the home environment. This curriculum has an average effect on achievement that is twice as large as the family’s socioeconomic status; it includes informed parent-child conversations about everyday events, asking questions about homework, helping with homework as needed, and ensuring that homework is complete. This body of research has been supported by more recent studies (see Fantuzzo, Davis, and Ginsburg 1995) that document the association between parent involvement and their children’s academic achievement.

This leads to the fourth framework: learning at home. Setting up a regular time and place for home study is probably one of the most important tasks a parent has. Students in the course were interested in this framework because they could relate well to the many nuances of study at home after school. To make this framework clearer, the students suggested writing a pamphlet to help parents understand homework responsibilities. Parents are not expected to understand the complexities of today’s curriculum, especially the high school subjects, but they are expected to ensure that students complete their homework. If they see that their child is having consistent difficulty completing the work, they should contact the teacher. Many times, teachers do not know that students are having difficulty. One can argue that they should know; but what is important here is that parents and teachers must work together to ensure that students learn their subjects in a thorough and timely manner.

Today’s parents continue to fear being involved in school governance. Epstein categorizes framework five as decision making, which is an awareness of the representation of families in school decisions. As students progress to high school, parents generally become less involved in the school, especially in governance issues. Yes, there are many parents who attend sports events or school performances, but only because their children are involved or they have a strong school spirit ethic. School administrators and teachers tend to not want parents to “meddle” in school governance issues, but they are wrong to embrace this attitude. Study after study has shown that student achievement improves when parents are able to play a key role in their children’s learning; parents as decision makers are very
powerful boosters of student achievement. There are many opportunities for parents to serve on advisory councils, curriculum committees, and management teams. These service opportunities enable parents to be involved in a meaningful way in joint problem-solving at every level. Students in this course appeared very interested in this framework. They made many suggestions to enhance parent involvement in schools as decision makers. They suggested that parents be given questionnaires and surveys after events like school plays or sports activities to query them about vital school issues. They also suggested small discussion groups after a performance to discuss issues that need immediate attention. Web sites, they noted, are replete with information, for example, the National Parent Information Network1 or the PTO Today2 provide a virtual library where parents can gain information about current and pressing issues in education. Knowledge of school issues is the engine that can empower parents to take a more active role in school governance.

Collaboration with the community is the sixth framework. This community/parent collaborative effort can pay huge dividends for schools, by helping them be more visible in the community; it brokers a collaborative effort between local businesses and the school. One idea that came forth from discussions of this collaborative effort was to institute the school supply cabinet. Students come from various socioeconomic backgrounds; some parents have the financial resources to purchase whatever their children need for school, while others do not have that luxury, or it places a heavy financial burden on the family budget. The supply cabinet is stocked with school supplies paid for by local businesses and others within the community and enables all students to have what they need for school. This is just one way that collaboration between the school and local businesses can be established and maintained.

Beyond the Classroom

The new generation of teachers is learning how to reach parents in ways other than the traditional pamphlets, take-home notes, and newsletters. Web sites are becoming increasingly available to all homes in the community as the cost of computers and Internet access decreases. Two teacher candidates in the course developed Web sites that could serve as a model for schools to keep parents informed. Most school districts now have Web sites and webmasters who maintain the sites. Keeping a Web site up-to-date is a daunting task; the Web masters can use all the help they can get. This is a perfect way for parents to be involved with their schools by sharing their expertise. It is also important that these Web sites be written in other languages besides English. Parents who are fluent in a language other than English could serve as resources to write information in other languages.

These Web sites also provide invaluable tools for teachers to communicate with parents about what is happening in their classrooms. Teachers can find numerous resources to help them enhance their curriculum of study, and these resources can be shared with parents so that they have a better understanding of what their children are learning. The appendix lists some of the many Web sites available for educators and parents.

The End of the Course

At the end of the course, teacher candidates met with a group of practicing teachers to exchange ideas about parent involvement. The teacher candidates wanted to know to what extent practicing teachers believed that parents are involved in their classrooms. The teachers were made up a cross section of teachers from elementary, middle, and high schools. Secondary teachers, especially high school teachers, were most vocal about the lack of parental involvement in their schools and classrooms. This vocal outcry set the stage for administering a simple parent involvement survey using the six frameworks of parent involvement outlined by Epstein. A teacher candidate read the definition of each type of parent involvement and included examples. The teachers were asked to respond to each example and indicate the number of parents that they considered as involved. The exercise proved enlightening for the teachers; parents were actually more involved in their children’s education than they realized. The discussion brought out that teachers talked to parents at the grocery store and at other places in the community. Parents had also sent in school supplies to help needy students. After the discussion, one teacher summed up the exercise by saying, “I had never thought that parents cared about school involvement, but after today, I realize that with a broader view of looking at parental involvement, I do have parents who have made meaningful connections to my classroom.”

The importance of parent involvement and its influence on student achievement is far-reaching. One teacher candidate summed it up in her writing: “The benefits of parental involvement are so immense that they are impossible to ignore. Parents are an invaluable resource to teachers, providing information about their child’s home life and what works best for that child in terms of learning and discipline.” She concluded that “as teachers, we need to convey the message that parents, school staff, teachers, and the community are on the same team trying to reach a common goal—that every student, everyday, learns and grows, and feels like a real human being.”

Key words: parent involvement, student learning, environment

NOTES

APPENDIX

Online Resources for Educators and Parents

National Coalition for Parental Involvement in Education, http://www.ncpie.org/: NCPIE serves as a representative for parent and family involvement initiatives at the national level, and provides resources and legislative information that can help member organizations promote parent and family involvement.

Boston’s After-School for All Partnership, http://www.afterschoolforall.org/: Provides information about after-school activities and programs.

ParentCAFE, http://www.parentcafe.com/: Offers resources for family enrichment, parenting tips, and information on how teachers can promote parental involvement in the school.


Family Involvement Network of Educators, http://www.gse.harvard.edu/: A national network of more than 4,500 people who are interested in promoting strong partnerships between children’s educators, their families, and their communities.

National Parent Teacher Association, http://www.pta.org/: Offers ways that parents can encourage student achievement, information about healthy lifestyles, and other ways parents can be involved in their child’s education.


REFERENCES


