

Collaborative Family-School Relationships for Children's Learning

Beliefs
and
Practices

VIRGINIA DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION

*Office of Student
Services*



*Office of Special
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CHAPTER

1

Overview

Current educational reform efforts in the State of Virginia are focused on closing the achievement gap and ensuring that all of the State's children learn to high standards. To this end, the State has implemented a variety of reform strategies, most notably the Standards of Learning (SOL) assessments, designed to enhance school improvement and ensure that all children are learning.

In all of these reform efforts, the State has put family involvement—a term that encompasses parents, primary caregivers, and other significant members of the child's immediate family—at the forefront. And for good reason. A significant knowledge base suggests that to enhance learning outcomes, productive home-school collaborations are essential (Lewis & Henderson, 1997).

While most educators agree with the value of family involvement, putting such relationships into action can be challenging. Consider these recent research findings (Bempechat, 1998; Christenson & Sheridan, 2001; Davies, 1993; Epstein, 1995):

- Families are interested in and concerned about their children's learning. They want to be involved, but typically report not knowing what they might do at home to help their child be more successful at school.
- Families from all strata—including those from diverse cultural, ethnic, and socioeconomic backgrounds—are involved in supporting their children's education.
- Families in general—and those from diverse cultural, ethnic, and socioeconomic backgrounds in particular—often wait for guidance from educators before interacting with the school.
- Educators generally value family involvement but report needing information on how to form collaborative partnerships with families.

In the context of educational reform, families have much to contribute to their children's education. But to optimize their contributions, educators first must develop productive family-school partnerships. In family-school partnerships, the input of *both* home and school is valued and the focus is on what *both* parents and educators can do to promote student learning. This includes providing families with sufficient information about changes (e.g., instructional changes resulting from Virginia's rigorous standards for what children should know and be able to do in the core subjects) and how those changes may have an impact upon their children's learning and progress, so that they can make good decisions. But, it also includes involving families in more substantial ways, such as making decisions about their child's educational program, suggesting and implementing interventions, and providing input on program improvement matters.

A family-school partnership is a way of thinking about forming connections between families and schools. Forming connections means developing an intentional and ongoing relationship between school and family that is designed to enhance children's learning and to address any obstacles that may impede it (Christenson & Sheridan, 2001).

"Families and teachers might wish that the school could do the job alone. But today's schools need families and today's families need the schools. In many ways, this mutual need may be the greatest hope for change."

Rich, 1987

Purpose

The purpose of *Collaborative Family-School Relationships for Children's Learning: Beliefs and Practices* is to provide an overview of how educators can develop productive family-school relationships that promote student learning. It offers a look at school-based practices that support parents in becoming partners in the effort to promote student learning and academic outcomes.

Organization

This document is organized into the following chapters:

- **Understanding past practices and influences.** This chapter presents a historical perspective of family-school relationships, including a description of recent influences and a discussion that considers the assumptions underlying the concept of parents as partners with the school. Questions answered in this section include: "What factors are pushing parents and school personnel to work together to promote student learning?" and "In the coming years, what factors are likely to exert the greatest influence on the efforts of parents and school personnel to work together to promote student learning?"
- **Fostering positive working relationships.** This chapter describes practices, beliefs, and attitudes that facilitate positive working relationships with parents. Questions answered in this section include: "In what ways are parents and

school staff working together to promote student learning?” “What guiding principles and/or beliefs play an instrumental role in developing working relationships to promote student learning?” and “What attitudes and actions promote positive working relationships?”

- **Establishing intervention points.** In this chapter, interventions designed to build and maintain collaborative relationships are described and illustrated with sample practices being used in schools across the country. Questions addressed in this section include: “What do we know about effective school-based practices?” and “What practices will be necessary in the future?”
- **Finding additional resources.** The last chapter features references and an annotated bibliography.

CHAPTER

2

Understanding Past Practices and Influences

Family involvement in education is not a new concept—indeed, it is as old as American education itself. For years, educators have espoused a strong belief in the value of parental involvement. And, for years, parents have participated with schools in helping their children learn to their potential.

Everyone seems to agree that family involvement is a good thing. So, why is such strong attention currently being paid to developing family-school relationships? A look at past, present, and future practices can help shed light on this question. Topics to be considered include:

- Past practices related to parent involvement in promoting children's learning.
- Changing assumptions underlying the concept of parents as partners with the school in promoting their children's learning.
- Current trends.

Historical Overview: Understanding Past Practices

Three movements can be seen as influencing current family involvement practices. These are:

- Parent education.
- Parent involvement in education.
- Family-school partnership.

Parent education. Parent education can be traced back to the 1920s. These early efforts grew out of the belief that children's development could be enhanced by informed child rearing practices (Berger, 1991). Over the years, many parent education programs have been developed in response to parents' desires for information about child/adolescent development and support in meeting their children's health and developmental needs.

Parent involvement. Originally, parent involvement grew out of a desire to include parents in their children's education, but in school-prescribed ways. This approach—which is often considered to be aligned with traditional, middle class values about education—views parents and school staff members as serving separate roles and responsibilities for educating and socializing children and youth.

As a result of this core belief, parent involvement is limited to such activities as volunteering, fundraising, and helping with homework. Similarly, most contacts between parents and educators are relegated to prescribed times—such as parent-teacher conferences or back-to-school nights—unless the child's behavior has forced a crisis, in which case parents are summoned immediately. Moreover, communication associated with this approach tends to be one-way, mostly from school to the home, and often focuses on teacher evaluation of student progress and/or teacher recommendations for what parents should do. In this approach, success typically is measured in terms of the number of parent contacts, or in terms of which parents attend school functions and participate at school.

Family-school partnership. In the late 1800s, it was a common practice for a community to hire a teacher who lived in the community. Such a practice encouraged close and frequent contact and shared norms between home and school. Contrast this with the situation facing most school communities in the mid 20th century, when a physical and social distance between the school staff and community became the norm. Stimulated, in part, by the movement to professionalize the teaching profession, teachers increasingly chose to live outside of the school community in which they worked. In some cases, a greater cultural diversity existed within the school community than within the school staff.

As a result, a discontinuity between home and school around key educational issues began to emerge. The discontinuity students experience between their school and home environments is one explanatory factor for lower school performance. Addressing discontinuity is critical for student success in school, and is a variable addressed in many effective family-school partnership programs (Comer, Haynes, Joyner, & Ben-Avie, 1996; Swap, 1993). The family-school partnership movement intended to address this discontinuity by changing school practices to reach families that were uninvolved and to address the physical and social distance that was increasing between families and educators.

Benefits of Working with Parents as Partners

- | | | |
|---|--|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ☑ Shared educational goals can counter information from competing sources such as television and peers. ☑ Collaborative intervention efforts can maximize opportunities for students to learn. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ☑ Mutual support between families and educators is one way to build social capital where it does not naturally exist. ☑ Using parent and educator perspectives leads to a better understanding of and | <p>solutions for learning and behavior difficulties.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ☑ Blaming can be circumvented when children exhibit learning and behavior difficulties in school. |
|---|--|--|

The family-school partnership approach is characterized by a belief in shared responsibility for educating and socializing children and youth. The approach emphasizes collaborative problem solving and shared decision making strategies to provide students with consistent, congruent messages about their schoolwork and behavior. Although families and educators each have legitimate roles in the partnership, they are not rigid or predetermined. Rather, the emphasis is on relationship building and finding ways for families and educators to work together to promote the educational experiences and school successes of students. Parents are valued for their contributions, whether they are performed in the school or in the home.

Changing Assumptions About Family Involvement

Over the years, attitudes about family involvement have been influenced and shaped by a number of factors. The most frequently cited are:

- Research and experience.
- Changing demographics of the student population.

Research and Experience Support the Positive Effect of Family-School Relationships

The cumulative impact of research findings underscores the importance of the home in contributing to children's school progress. The quality of family-school interaction rather than the quantity of contacts, has been shown to have a positive association with student achievement and behavior (Patrikakou & Weissberg, 1999). Relationships also are important for students. For example, Comer (1984) noted that "the attachment and identification with a meaningful adult motivates or reinforces a child's desire to learn" (p. 327), and, thus, argued that schools can and should be redesigned to promote a strong, positive attachment for students to school.

"If educators view children simply as students, they are likely to see the family as separate from school. That is, the family is expected to do its job and leave the education of children to the schools. If educators view children as children, they are likely to see both the family and community as partners with the school in children's education and development."

Epstein, 1995

What parents do to support learning (family process variables) predicts scholastic ability more reliably than *who* families are (family status variables). The power of out-of-school time (community and peer influences) also helps to explain school performance differences. For example, positive home influences—especially during the summer months—have been found to differentiate between low and high achievers (Christenson & Sheridan, 2001).

In general, family involvement in schooling is associated with many benefits for students that are the kinds of benefits desired by educators. Among those are:

- Improved grades and test scores.
- Positive attitude toward schoolwork.
- Positive behavior.
- Work completion.
- Increased participation in classroom activities.
- Increased attendance.

Moreover, in the absence of parent support and reinforcement, reform efforts focused on school and teacher practices (e.g., new curricula and strategies) have not been as successful in improving achievement.

Intervention research also has supported the role of families. Many behavioral interventions designed for individual children with identified needs (e.g., Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder, conduct disorders) are more successful when addressed across home and school environments (August, Anderson, & Bloomquist, 1992; Webster-Stratton, 1993). Further, research has shown that adolescents engage in less high-risk behavior if parent and school connections are present (Resnick, et al., 1997).

Changing Family Demographics

The increased cultural diversity of the student population and the presence of non-English speaking parents has posed a variety of communication challenges. Parents from different ethnic backgrounds may view the purpose of education quite differently than school staff (Bempechat, 1998). A growing number of parents either have not had the benefit of a positive personal schooling experience or are new immigrants to the United States. Consequently, they may be unfamiliar with school policies and practices. Less cultural capital makes it more difficult for them to support their children's learning and to navigate the educational system, particularly at the secondary level (Coleman, 1987; Delgado-Gaitan, 1991).

In addition, changes during the last few decades in the structure and function of families have given rise to many concerns. One concern centers on the family's capacity to provide the conditions that foster children's school progress (Kellaghan, Sloane, Alvarez, & Bloom, 1993). For example, the amount of time available for parents to support their children's learning—especially if it requires being present at school—and to interact with children about personal matters is shrinking due to increases in single parent and dual income families. Referred to as the erosion of social capital, the loss of quality child-adult interactive time has been cited as a primary reason for the decline in school performance and for more children being less well prepared for school tasks in kindergarten (Coleman, 1987).

Looking at the Past to Inform the Future: Emerging Trends

The current context for developing collaborative family-school partnerships is, in part, shaped by past practices. As collaborative family-school partnerships are being formed, several trends are emerging that are likely to exert influence on the future efforts of parents and school personnel to work together to promote student learning. [Note: these trends are in addition to educational ones as shown in the sidebar, *Influential Educational Trends Affecting Family Involvement*.]

Trend: Looking at the Formation of Collaborative School-Family Partnerships From a Systems Approach

One of the most significant practices involves a systems approach. The shift to systems thinking—defined here as a holistic or ecological approach to considering family-school influences on children's school performance and progress—is emerging as a promising practice (Christenson & Sheridan, 2001). Systems thinking represents a major change in philosophy for many educators and parents, especially for those who view schools and teachers as solely responsible for educational outcomes.

Operating from a systems-ecological perspective, educators assess the reciprocal influences in a student's many environments (e.g., home, school, community, etc.) and emphasize contributing factors rather than a singular cause for the student's level of school performance. If conflict is chronic and unresolved, a systems approach holds that conflict between home and school may be a contributing factor to the student's school performance. This approach redefines school success as the product of what educators and parents both do to support students as learners.

Systems thinking about children's school performance recognizes that teachers and

“Parents are the essential link to improving American education, and schools have to do a better job of reaching out to them. Sending home a report card is not enough. Parents want to help their children succeed in school, and often need guidance on how to be most effective.”

Richard Riley
Secretary, U.S. Office of
Education
1999

schools alone cannot help students reach their potential. Parental involvement must be a significant part of any discussion about a student's needs. In addition, parental responsibility will be expected (e.g., parents will be included in implementing specific interventions). Because systems thinking also includes students, the degree to which educators and parents are ready and prepared to involve students in problem solving conferences and encourage their active participation in student-led conferences influences home and school working together.

Trend: Creating Conditions To Enhance Family-School Connections for Children's Learning

Increasingly, students are experiencing many school difficulties that are not easily resolved and/or that may persist across multiple school years. As a result, many educators are looking for ways to nurture family-school partnerships. Examples of emerging practices include:

- Development of efficient, routine communication systems across home and school. Such systems must address all families, including those with no phones.
- School-based practices directed toward building trust and focusing on problem solving and shared decision making with parents.
- A focus on program improvement (e.g., evaluations designed to determine which families are not being reached with certain practices) rather than solely on program utilization.

Trend: Providing Professional Development for School Staff Members

New skills and knowledge may enhance school personnel's ability to form collaborative family-school partnerships. Most of these development activities require the input of families. Attention to the knowledge and skills school personnel need and the opportunities to engage in specific partnership activities are essential as these new partnerships are formed.

Influential Educational Trends Affecting Family Involvement

Since the 1960s, several changes have taken place that have had an impact on family involvement practices. These include:

- ☑ **Early childhood education.** Head Start was established in 1965 to support positive child development through early childhood education. Parents were considered an integral part of the Head Start model (e.g., presenting goals for their children, identify needs to be addressed in supporting their children, making joint decisions about their children's educational program).
- ☑ **Respect for cultural backgrounds.** As the country became more diverse during the latter part of the 20th century, a growing realization emerged of the value of different cultural and ethnic backgrounds. The use of the term cultural diversity rather than culturally deprived to describe families set the foundation for expanding traditional involvement practices to include those that respect the varied contributions families can and do make to their children's learning and development.
- ☑ **Support for the entire family.** Beginning in the 1970s, services for children emphasized support for the entire family. Public Law 99-457, the Education of the Handicapped Act Amendments of 1986, is a case in point. With the law, services for children with disabilities could include those directed at the family.
- ☑ **Federally-mandated family partnerships.** The role of federal mandates has been a powerful influence for promoting family-school partnerships. Most recently, the significance of parents for children's learning was highlighted in the National Educational Goal 8: Parent Participation (Goals 2000: Educate America Act, P.L. 103-227) in 1995. The goal states: By the year 2000, every school will promote partnerships that increase parental involvement and participation in promoting the social, emotional, and academic growth of children. In addition, federal efforts during the last three decades have given parents more voice in federally-funded programs that serve them and their children (e.g., Title I, Individuals with Disabilities Education Act).

CHAPTER

3

Fostering Positive Family-School Working Relationships

Collaborative family-school partnerships that promote student learning assume that practices are in place that reflect changed roles and responsibilities. Working together in collaborative partnerships also assumes a set of attitudes and beliefs that respects the contributions of all parties and encourages parity in decision making. An understanding of the practices, beliefs, and attitudes that foster positive family-school partnerships—as well as the practices, beliefs, and attitudes that undermine such collaborations—is essential to building productive working relationships. To this end, this chapter offers a brief look at:

- The changing face of family involvement—new roles and responsibilities.
- Beliefs and attitudes that foster collaborative practices.
- Challenges to implementing collaborative practices.

The Changing Face of Family Involvement

In family-school partnerships the input of both home and school is valued and the focus is on what both parents and educators can do to promote student learning. Practices may vary from school to school, but underlying each is the principle of shared roles and responsibilities. [*Note:* Researcher, Joyce Epstein has described types of family-school involvement that foster productive working relationships. A summary of her work is found in the sidebar, *Types of Family Involvement.*]

Types of Family-School Involvement

Parenting

Families establish home environments to support learning. Schools may assist families with parenting skills, help parents understand child and adolescent development, and work with families to provide home conditions that support learning. Sample practices for educators to consider include:

- Offer information on how parents can help their children succeed in school through a variety of methods (e.g., workshops, videos, books, tip sheets, computerized messages, bulletin boards).
- Develop family support programs, parent education offerings responsive to family preferences, and parent centers in the school.
- Provide home visits at critical transition points (e.g., elementary to middle school) to establish a personal contact, provide information, and address parents' questions.

Communicating

Develop effective two-way, frequent, systematic communication between home and school about school programs and children's progress. Sample practices for educators to consider include:

- Establish an easy-to-use contact system between home and school.
- Hold an individual interview and joint assessment of the child when first attending the school.
- Create parent-teacher-student partnership agreements to specify roles and responsibilities.

Volunteering

Schools have in place recruitment, training, and organizational processes for families that enable them to support children and school programs. Parents help and support school activities and functions. Sample practices for educators to consider include:

- Survey parents to assess their skills, talents, interests, and needs, and use the results to establish a volunteer program.
- Expect parents to volunteer and offer many options. For example, offer busy parents a Call Me Once Volunteer Card that commits them to serve only once a year unless permission to be called again is granted.
- Include all family members in field trips, special programs, and school activities.

Learning at Home

Parents support and enhance learning at home. Schools ensure parents have the information needed to create family learning environments. Sample practices for educators to consider include:

- Provide interactive homework activities to increase parent-child communication about schoolwork.
- Sponsor a Parents Make a Difference evening where parents receive an overview of what students will be learning, how they will be assessed, what parents can expect, and how they can assist and make a difference.
- Use home-school assignment books to facilitate communication about ways to encourage learning for children and youth.

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Types of Family-School Involvement (continued)

Decision Making

Parents participate in governance and advocacy activities. They make joint decisions with educators, including decisions for both practices and policies. Sample practices educators may consider include:

- Ensure that parents' voices are heard on school decisions (e.g., grade level family representatives on school councils, school improvement teams, etc.).
- Develop a family-school team to design ways to address issues that require parent-school input and cooperation for a successful outcome.
- Conduct parent focus groups to increase understanding of critical issues and necessary resources (e.g., improving student success on required tests).

Collaborating with the Community

Collaborate with business and community agencies in ways that support students' learning and school experiences. Sample practices educators may consider include:

- Work with local faith-based organizations to sponsor Education Sunday, a workshop to help families share ideas for providing academic and motivational support to students.
- Provide information on community resources to address parent concerns.
- Establish an Adopt-a-School program, a family-coordinated effort that arranges for businesses to provide funds and services to the school (e.g., after school homework/recreational programs).

Source: Epstein, J. L. (1995). School/ family/ community partnerships: Caring for the children we share. *Phi Delta Kappan*, 701-712.

[It is important to note that in the Epstein model some traditional definitions related to involvement have been broadened (e.g., help at home is not limited to the traditional notion of homework assistance, but rather is defined as including encouraging, listening, reacting, monitoring and discussing schoolwork; the concept of workshop is broadened to include a variety of ways that information may be made available to parents and educators).]

To illustrate the changing face of family involvement, the U.S. Department of Education has delineated family-school roles that promote student learning (Moles, 1993). The joint roles that follow are organized by level of involvement, with the role requiring the least amount of involvement being described first (e.g., all families and educators should be involved as co-communicators; fewer would be expected to be involved as co-decision makers, although this would be a reasonable goal to pursue):

- **Co-communicators:** Addresses the need to exchange information that enables both educators and families to assist children's learning. *Examples include:* using assignment books or homework journals paired with family understanding of procedures; providing both family and teacher strategies for addressing student concerns in school publications; holding beginning of the year parent-teacher-student conferences to set academic goals, explore expectations, and develop learning plans to enhance student support; and providing forums for two-way communication to address educator and family concerns, questions, and ideas.
- **Co-supporters:** Addresses the needs of the partners to support the child, and also the need for the partners to support each other. *Examples include:* developing an education hotline to address parent concerns (e. g., attendance policies, graduation standards, special education, enrollment options, alternative schools, discipline and school safety, early childhood education); organizing student success teams composed of educators, community resource people, and parents to assist students who need additional help and resources to achieve success; inviting adult volunteers to organize afterschool programs; and campaigning for the positive passage of school referendums.
- **Co-learners:** Provides opportunities for educators and families to learn about each other and how to work together to support student learning. *Examples include:* encouraging classroom visitations and observations followed by time for interaction between home and school; linking family workshops to the curriculum; conducting home visits (e.g., to acquaint parents with the school's mission and curriculum, to suggest home learning strategies, to address parents' questions, etc.); holding interactive discussion forums (e.g., graduation standards, assessment and testing processes); providing several back-to-school nights at different times; and take attendance and following-up with non-attendees so that all families have information about school policies and procedures.
- **Co-teachers:** Recognizes the formal teaching of students in school settings and the ways families support and encourage learning at home and in the community. *Examples include:* publishing newsletter articles on how parents can keep student records and monitor progress, and involving parents as teachers and experts in the classroom to share their talents and support the curriculum.
- **Co-decision-makers:** Focuses on participation in formal organizations and committees (e.g., Parent-Teacher-Student Association, school site council, Principal Advisory Committee, etc.). *Examples include:* creating a family-school team to address mutual concerns, forming committees to support each academic area or grade level, and creating time for parents and teachers to discuss goals and expectations for student performance.

“Making education a priority in the home and the family-school relationship a priority for children’s school success recognizes that how students spend their time in school and out-of-school is critical for their level of school performance. It also recognizes the significance of families and the contributions of schools to children’s learning.”

Christenson & Sheridan

2001

The delineation of roles provides a concrete way of thinking about how families and educators can be involved in ways that are sensitive to their needs.

Currently, schools are in the process of expanding their family-school offerings to include more collaborative practices that take into account various family roles. One commonly implemented practice that provides a range of opportunities is the *family-school team*. These collaborative teams work on such issues as:

- Guiding the development of family-school programs that fit the needs of the students, families, and educators in a school building.
- Setting policies and practices based on family and school input.
- Providing an ongoing mechanism to address family-school concerns about student learning.

One of the most noteworthy of these family-school team models is the *Comer School Planning and Management Team* (Comer, et al., 1996). The Comer model has been implemented in more than 600 schools with the following results:

- On average, a greater percentage of students achieved instructional objectives and performed higher on standardized achievement tests.
- Achievement gains in Comer schools exceeded gains for the school district.
- Students in Comer schools experienced significantly greater positive changes in attendance, teacher ratings of classroom behavior, attitude toward authority, and group participation. They also reported significantly better perceived school competence and self-competence when compared to students in non-Comer schools.

Family outreach is another practice currently being implemented in schools across the country that is designed to diversify family roles. Family outreach activities include specially-designed workshops for families that engage them in solving the real problems of their children. For example, in one case study, middle school students were not completing their homework. Given the focus on standards for learning, this behavior was seen as having serious ramifications for students' educational programming and placements (e.g., retention). Using the family outreach approach, school personnel:

- Contacted parents and explained that many students are having difficulty completing homework and addressed the ramifications.
- Asked parents for their willingness to work with the school and other parents to design an intervention that may increase students' task completion.
- Expressed optimism that by working together the presenting behavior can be changed significantly.

In this case, parents attended several sessions that included information sharing and planning, and a presentation of evaluation and support practices to be used

"It is important to ensure school practices provide parents with:

- *Access: parental right to inclusion in decision making processes.*
- *Voice: parents' feeling that they were heard and listened to at all points in the process.*
- *Ownership: parents agree with and are contributing to any action plan affecting them."*

Osher, 1997

during implementation. Parents were actively involved in suggesting strategies and carrying them out. The result: Students' task completion improved substantially.

Beliefs and Attitudes that Foster Collaborative Family-School Partnerships

To realize collaborative partnerships fully, certain beliefs and attitudes are needed. How educators think about family involvement is critical to their success in working productively with families (see sidebar, *Reflection: Personal Attitudes Toward Families*).

Successful collaborative relationships with families are based on a number of beliefs about families and the perceived benefits of family-school relationships. Beliefs associated with positive family-school partnerships include (Liontos, 1992):

- **Family-school relationships should be focused on student progress and success.** The reason for educators and families to cooperate, coordinate, and collaborate is to enhance learning opportunities, educational progress, and school success for students. Therefore, family-school interactions focus on what each partner can do to improve the development and learning of children and youth.
- **Families are equal partners in attaining educational goals for students.** Educators view families and creating family-school relationships as essential for children's optimal academic, social, and emotional learning.
- **Both in- and out-of-school times are recognized as influencing students' school performance.** When student concerns are described, the reciprocal influence between family and school contexts is considered. Decisions made at school affect home, and vice versa.
- **Sharing information about child behavior across settings is valued.** Each partner recognizes that he or she sees the child primarily in one setting and understands how the child is reacting in the other setting. Differences in child observations are expected (e.g., the child does not behave the same way in home situations) and are valuable for assessment and intervention planning.
- **Collaboration has a positive impact on student learning.** Educators believe that home *and* school can accomplish more than either home or school can accomplish alone. They also believe in equality (the willingness to listen to, respect, and learn from one another) and *parity* (the blending of knowledge, skills, and ideas to enhance positive outcomes for children) (Welch & Sheridan, 1995).
- **Families should be active partners in decision making.** Educators believe in the value of making decisions with parents. They avoid such practices as making decisions in separate meetings prior to meeting with parents. Educators recognize parents' expertise and seek input from them on a regular basis. Educators believe in including parents when addressing concerns about student learning.
- **Problems are solved mutually and without blaming each other.** When students are experiencing school difficulties, school personnel and parents under-

Reflection: Personal Attitudes Toward Families**Ask:**

- Do I accept parents as they are, or do I try to change them to "fit" a predetermined parent role?
- Do I try to build relationships, or do I stay aloof in

- my interactions with family members?
- When I tell parents that I will do something, do I follow through?
- Am I always trying to teach parents something, inform

them of something, or instruct them about something, or do I also try to learn from them and about them?

stand that two-way communication is necessary. Families and school personnel realize that they see the children's behavior in their respective settings and, therefore, withhold judgment until both sides have had an opportunity to provide input. Blame is not attributed to only the family or only the school.

- **Problem solving is based on a positive, strength-based orientation.** Families and school personnel operate from a nondeficit model and they focus on strengths of individuals (educators, parents, student). School personnel view parents as resources for addressing educational concerns. Collaborative problem solving efforts help to foster optimism about what school personnel and families can accomplish by working together.
- **Family-school relationships are cultivated and sustained over time.** Family-school relationships are an ongoing process. Families and educators work together within and across school years to address mutual concerns and provide mutual support for enhancing the learning progress of children and adolescents. Thus, educators realize that working as partners with parents this year will strengthen the partnership in subsequent years.

Certain attitudes also underlie successful family-school partnerships (see sidebar, *Ways To Model Positive Attitudes*). Indeed, working as partners is an attitude—not solely an activity to be implemented. In addition to the aforementioned beliefs, two attitudinal dispositions—perspective taking and seeking win-win solutions—are very important for connecting with parents.

An emphasis on perspective taking. Positive working relationships are fostered when educators accommodate parents by beginning where they are, not where educators think parents should or could be. In collaborative partnerships, everyone assumes that each player is doing the best he or she can. This means that judgments must be suspended and an effort made to understand the family's perspective. Before drawing conclusions, educators should strive to understand parental perspectives and desires. For example, it is important to recognize that families and children may be dealing with unique situations that make it difficult for them to be involved and available to school personnel. Sensitivity to parents in terms of their time, skills, and knowledge helps to avoid negative judgments.

Seek win-win solutions. Conflict is natural. Educators should not avoid conflict

"Treat family members as you would like to be treated. If feeling judgmental, it helps to ask:

- *If I had a child in school, what specific information would I want to hear from the teacher at the beginning of the year?*
- *How and when would I want to be approached about a problem?*
- *How would I want to be spoken to? Listened to?*
- *Would I like to hear from the teacher when my child is doing well or only when there is a problem?"*

Canter & Canter
1999

Ways To Model Positive Attitudes

- Listen to one another's perspective.
- View differences as strengths.
- Focus on mutual interests.
- Share information about the child, the home and school systems when exploring problems encountered in these systems.
- Solicit input (e.g., ideas and opinions about the child, concerns, goals, and potential solutions to problems).
- Respect the skills and knowledge of each other.
- Address all needs (e.g., parent's, teacher's, and student's) when planning.
- Make shared decisions about a child's educational program and goals.
- Share resources to work toward goal attainment.
- Provide a consistent message to the student about schoolwork and behavior.
- Demonstrate a willingness to address conflict.
- Refrain from finding fault.
- Commit to sharing successes.

Source: Christenson, S. L., & Sheridan, S. M. (2001). *School and families: Creating essential connections for learning*. New York, NY: Guilford Press.

or resent differences of opinion. In fact, differences are to be expected, largely because parents and teachers observe children in their respective settings. A win-win attitude in the presence of conflict is essential to fostering positive relationships. Emphasizing a win-win orientation helps to circumvent blame when students' are having learning and behavioral difficulties in school. Educators demonstrate a win-win attitude when they state a desire to work toward resolution, avoid making attributions for problems, and discuss what can be done at home and at school to achieve goals for the student.

Challenges To Implementing Collaborative Practices

Challenges exist in creating school-family partnerships. Educators must be sensitive to the demands placed on families, and families must understand the demands placed on educators. Neither party should request the impossible, although this can happen in family-school interactions.

To create and sustain positive working relationships, there must be a mechanism to identify and systematically address barriers. Barriers are not necessarily negative. They can present an opportunity to change practices in a way that increases perspective taking and understanding between families and educators. Families and educators may experience certain challenges when working as partners to improve student learning. Examples of common barriers for families, educators, and the partnership are shown in the sidebar, *Barriers to Family-School Partnerships*.

If barriers are identified and understood, they can be addressed by creative problem solving. It is helpful to think of a barrier as a challenge requiring the attention and ideas of both educators and family members. Doing so often leads to changes in school practices for reaching out to families. It also can lead to new roles and responsibilities for families.

Barriers to Family-School Partnerships

Educators

- Ambiguous commitment to parent involvement.
- Use of negative communication about students' school performance and productivity.
- Use of stereotypes about families, such as dwelling on family problems as an explanation for student performance.
- Doubts about the abilities of families to address schooling concerns.
- Lack of time and funding for family outreach programs.
- Fear of conflict with families.
- Narrow conception of the roles families can play.
- Lack of training for educators on how to maintain a partnership with families.

Families

- Feelings of inadequacy.
- Adopting a passive role by leaving education to schools.
- Linguistic and cultural differences, resulting in less "how to" knowledge about how schools function and their role.
- Lack of role models, information, and knowledge about resources.

Sources:

Christenson, S. L., & Sheridan, S. M. (2001). *School and families: Creating essential connections for learning*. New York, NY: Guilford Press.

Liontos, L.B. (1992). *At-risk families and schools: Becoming partners*. Eugene, OR: ERIC Clearinghouse on Educational Management, College of Education, University of Oregon.

Weiss, H.M., & Edwards, M.E. (1992). The family-school collaboration project: Systemic interventions for school improvement. In S.L. Christenson & J.C. Conoley (Eds.), *Home-school collaboration: Enhancing children's academic and social competence* (pp. 215-243). Silver Spring, MD: National Association of School Psychologists.

- Suspicion about treatment from educators.
- Lack of responsiveness to parental needs.
- Lack of supportive environment and resources (e.g., poverty, limited access to services).
- Economic, emotional, and time constraints.

Partnership

- Limited time for communication and meaningful dialogue.
- Communication primarily during crises.
- Misunderstanding differences in parent-educator perspectives about children's performance.
- Limited contact for building trust within the family-school relationship.
- Limited skills and knowledge about how to collaborate.
- Psychological and cultural differences that lead to assumptions and build walls.
- Limited use of perspective taking.
- Limiting impressions of child to observations in only one environment.
- Lack of a routine communication system.
- Previous negative interactions and experiences between families and schools.
- Limited understanding of the constraints faced by the other parties.

CHAPTER

4

Establishing Intervention Points

Across the country, educators are forming partnerships with parents to promote student learning. A variety of interventions are being designed to build and maintain collaborative relationships. Educators are learning much from these initial family-school efforts about what is effective in promoting student success. Among the most common intervention points are:

- Establishing a welcoming and positive school climate.
- Implementing effective communication strategies.
- Resolving conflicts.
- Including families in problem solving and decision making.
- Enhancing learning at home.
- Engaging uninvolved families.

Establishing a Welcoming and Positive School Climate

School climate can have a significant effect on family-school partnerships. In the context of forming partnerships with families, care should be taken to ensure a climate that is welcoming and that fosters trust between the home and school. This is particularly true when there are social and/or physical distances between homes and schools, or when there is a history of poor relationships between families and the school (e.g., uncomfortable meetings, a large number of meetings to discuss disciplinary actions taken against a child).

A Welcoming Climate

If family-school partnerships are to thrive, schools must be welcoming, family-friendly communities (Moles, 1996; Tomlinson, 1996). A welcoming climate is essential because it sets the context for positive participation (Batey, 1996).

Relationships and interaction variables are important to parents in determining whether the school environment is welcoming (Zorka, Godber, Hurley, & Christenson, 2001). For example, consider the factors identified by a sample of ethnically diverse parents in a large midwestern urban school district as influential in establishing a welcoming climate:

- Opportunities to talk with their child's teacher.
- A positive relationship between the child and teacher.
- Invitations to meet with school personnel to address concerns.
- An overall positive feeling in their child's classroom and school.
- A positive relationship between families and teachers.
- Frequent parent-teacher conferences.
- Cleanliness of the school.
- Initial contact when families first enter the school building.
- The respectful handling of differences of opinion and conflicts.

Sample welcoming practices. A common welcoming practice in schools is “meet and greet.” When families enter the school building, they are greeted and welcomed.

Early contacts in which school personnel introduce themselves and the educational program also signal a welcoming climate. Such contacts are made long before an issue related to student performance arises. For example, educators may make initial contact with parents in the early years or when a family moves into the school community. This meeting, preferably face to face, provides an opportunity to share information about the school and to learn more about the family.

In addition, educators may welcome families through the offering of special events. Group information sharing is one technique that communicates an interest in family views and opinions. For example, teachers, parents, and students may come together to share their ideas and desires for making the school year the “best” ever. Each group member is encouraged to share (e.g., teachers explain their goals for students, parents share goals for their children, students identify their goals for themselves). Any decisions made are done so through consensus. To ensure that ideas are implemented, communication vehicles are identified before the group disbands.

A Climate Based on Trust

Closely aligned with a welcoming climate is the concept of trust. In the context of forming partnerships with families, trust building may be viewed as climate building between family and school (Weiss & Edwards, 1992). Trust building creates the conditions that foster participation and a positive working partnership that promotes children's learning (Dunst, Johanson, Rounds, Trivette, & Hamby, 1992). Trust also is a prerequisite for more serious intervention discussions (Davies, 1991).

Parents and educators alike consider trust a very important part of effective partnerships centered on improving student learning—even though parents typically report trusting teachers more than teachers report trusting parents (Adams & Christenson, 2000). Teacher trust in students and parents has been found to be a significant positive predictor of differences in urban elementary school students' achievement (Goddard, Tschannen-Moran, & Hoy, 2001). And, parent trust for teachers has been positively correlated with the completion of course credits, grade point average, and attendance for high school students.

The time and effort required to build trust between families and schools can be undermined by the school's perceived need for efficiency. Too often, quick and efficient solutions to family communication and involvement are chosen over more lengthy interaction processes designed to build strong, trusting relationships. While it may not appear necessary to focus trust building practices in cases where families are already trusting of the school, such activities may enhance participation and result in greater collaboration. Further, trust building practices usually are necessary to engage those families who do not share traditional school values or who may come from diverse cultural, ethnic, and/or linguistic backgrounds. For these families, typical "one-shot" events or interactions with family members neither allow educators to learn about family beliefs, practices, values, or preferences, nor allow families to explore their feelings about the school and develop a comfort level with educators. Families and school personnel need time to learn from and about each other so that trust may be established.

Sample trust building practices. Schools that pay attention to trust and create a climate for participation routinely examine their own practices. The entire school staff establishes a tone at school for welcoming families. Extra care is taken to create a welcoming and trusting school environment for building a partnership with those families who may feel less connected to education.

School personnel also may communicate trust by seeking family input. This may be done through a variety of practices, including conducting needs assessments, tracking non-attendees at school functions and conferences for the purpose of

Reflection: Building Trust with Students

Use the following questions to guide reflections related to building trust with students:

- What extra effort has been made to enhance the involvement or connection to school for the student?
- How can our relationship with the student be enhanced so that the student wants to invite the parent to attend back-to-school night or parent-teacher-student conferences?
- Does the student feel it is his or her school (i.e., has a sense of belonging)?
- Do I convey appreciation for parents' ideas and input about their child?

implementing other outreach activities (e.g., home visits, a positive phone call), and extending personal invitations to families who are less involved.

Parents often form their first impressions about schools from the community grapevine—even before they enter the school to enroll their child. Educators should ensure that positive things are being said about the school throughout the community. Thus, trust also is built when educators are vocal in the community about the effectiveness of the school in supporting student achievement.

Finally, because most students share their enthusiasm—or lack thereof—for learning and school with their parents, another practice concerns building trust with students. In addition to enhancing learning, building trust with students may carry over into the family (see sidebar, *Reflection: Building Trust with Students*). While it is important to build trust with all students, such practices may be particularly important for those students who feel alienated.

[*Note:* Other practices that build trust and create a welcoming climate are found in the sidebar, *Practices that Build Trust and Create a Welcoming Climate*.]

“Effective communication requires delivery of the right message: Mutual respect and interdependence of home, school, and community are essential to children’s development.”

McAfee, 1993

Practices that Build Trust and Create a Welcoming Climate

- Greeting families by name and initiating positive contact when they first enter the school.
- Improving the physical appearance of the school (e.g., cleanliness, bulletin boards are informative and inviting).
- Ensuring the welcoming sign relays a positive invitation for visitors.
- Delivering a special welcome package for newcomers.
- Maintaining a point of contact between home and school.
- Preparing print materials in native languages.
- Checking the tone and content of messages school personnel convey.
- Providing prompt responses to parental concerns.
- Making contact at the first sign of a concern.
- Offering group activities (e.g., multicultural celebrations and information-sharing sessions) that encourage families and school personnel to become acquainted.
- Reaching out to parents through home visits, regular and positive telephone calls and memos, and offering to meet parents at their convenience.
- Increasing interactive time between parents and educators.
- Creating opportunities to be co-learners with parents.
- Maintaining the focus of communication on student outcomes and what can be done together to improve students' school experiences.

Implementing Effective Communication Strategies

Frequent, regular, two-way communication between home and school is needed to promote student learning. If parents and educators share information about children's interests, needs, and progress, and are informed about what each other expects with respect to student behavior, achievement, and discipline, the partners have a better understanding of the student's performance. The goal is to provide a consistent message to the student about the value of learning.

In the context of building partnerships, an underlying goal of communication is to provide a consistent message to families that the school wants to collaborate in promoting student educational success (Weiss & Edwards, 1992). Ideally, all forms of communication from educators to parents should convey the following themes:

- A desire to develop a working partnership.
- The importance of family input in improving children's educational progress.
- The importance of a strong family learning environment to children's success in school.
- The importance of working together to identify mutually advantageous solutions to problems that exist.

In addition to verbal communications, school personnel should analyze their print materials to ensure that these themes are present.

Sample practices for implementing effective communication practices.

Communication is complex, and given the demands placed on families and educators, practices should be streamlined by using both systemwide and individual communication strategies. Systemwide strategies such as school-wide use of assignment books or homework journals, parent-teacher grams, homework hotlines, electronic technology (e.g., class listservs), and school-family newsletters are useful for disseminating school-based information relevant to specific grade levels or classes and generally reach many families effectively.

In contrast, individual strategies that emphasize personal contact through home visits, phone calls, and personal notes may be used with a smaller proportion of parents. Personal contact has been found to be the most effective way to reach families, especially those who are uninvolved or who feel disenfranchised. Many schools use good news phone calls, which are very powerful for getting families enthused about their children's learning progress. Schools might consider asking some parents to report good news to the schools.

When developing communication practices, it is helpful to refer to the following guidelines (Christenson & Hirsch, 1998; Sheridan, Cowan, & Eagle, 2000):

“Much like partners in business, partners in education must work hard to clarify their mutual interests in the children they share.”

Epstein, 1995

- **Emphasize the importance of listening and communicating a desire for problem resolution.** The best communication forces you to listen. Good communication is not just simply sending and receiving, nor is good communication simply a mechanical exchange of data. No matter how important the message, if no one listens, all is lost.
- **Use solution-oriented language when communicating to families about student-related concerns.** Solution-oriented language: focuses on solutions, not problems; uses non-blaming language (refers to difficulties/concerns not problems, and a problematic situation not problem individuals); reframes school-based concerns as learning goals for the student; constructs solutions that fit personal constraints of both systems; and emphasizes student improvement and progress toward goals.
- **Express concern for the student.** It is helpful to use statements that express concern for the student rather than a laundry list of problems the child may have. Most families do not want to hear what is wrong with their children. However, on the other hand, families generally appreciate specific, behavioral descriptions of what their children are doing and how they can learn to respond more accurately or appropriately.
- **Help parents view their children as learners.** Enhance parental beliefs that they can be helpful and make a difference. Phrase communication in such a way that a message of hopefulness is evident to the parent. Negative messages from school (e.g., “Your child is having trouble,” “Your child is not motivated”) tell parents their children are not doing well and may encourage them to give up hope instead of trying to help by becoming involved. Optimistic messages, on the other hand, help parents believe their children can learn and want to learn.
- **Include students in communications whenever possible.** Students are adopting new roles with respect to conferences. The traditional evaluation-oriented conferences are being replaced in many elementary and secondary schools with goal setting and/or student-led conferences in which students report to their teachers or advisers and parents about their school experiences and academic and behavioral performance.

“When elephants fight it is
the grass that suffers.”

Kikai Proverb

[*Note:* For more practices, see the sidebar, *Effective Communication Practices.*]

Resolving Conflicts

Conflict can arise when educators and families have differences of opinion. Few people—including educators and family members—like conflict. And, many avoid conflict by not sharing concerns with one another—a practice that can hinder getting help for a student.

Differences in opinions and viewpoints are inevitable in encounters between parents and school personnel. Family members and educators, by virtue of their respective relationships with the child, hold different perspectives. For example,

Effective Communication Practices

Strive for a positive orientation rather than a deficit-based crisis orientation.

- Make good news phone calls.
- Invite and incorporate parent reactions to policies and practices.
- Contact parents at the first sign of a concern.
- Reframe concerns for the child as areas for growth and shared goals.
- Express confidence that working together can make a difference for the students' school progress.

Develop a regular, reliable home-school communication system that increases the potential for two-way communication.

- Use family-school communication/assignment books.
- Ask parents to tell you the best way to contact them.
- Establish shared parent-educator responsibility for contacts (e.g., adviser system at secondary level).
- Provide handbooks, newsletters, and folders that describe relevant home and school information.
- Offer question-answer sessions about school policies.
- Use various modes of communication (e.g., electronic communication, answering machine messages, notes, face-to-face meetings, phone conversations, etc.).
- Make interpreters available as needed.

Focus communication and dialogue on children's engagement with school and learning.

- Use two-way communication sheets for classroom activities and progress. Suggest home-based activities to support learning (e.g., observation checklist, activity extensions).
- Discuss current, observable events and solicit information about child and family only as it relates to child's engagement with learning.
- Use home-school journals or notes.
- Conduct family-school meetings (with students present) to coordinate interventions and monitor student progress.
- Create a shared parent-educator monitoring system (e.g., educational file, contract).

Ensure that parents have the information they need to support their children's schooling and learning.

- Offer several orientation nights with follow-up contact for nonattendees.
- Offer parent support groups to disseminate information on schooling.
- Offer meetings on topics of mutual interest (e.g., curriculum).
- Check for parents' understanding (e.g., how schools function, intervention plan).
- Refrain from jargon when communicating important policies (e.g., attendance, grading, homework, discipline, visitation, health, and grade promotion/retention).

continued on page 30

Effective Communication Practices

(continued)

Create formal and informal opportunities to communicate and build trust between home and school.

- Schedule grade-level breakfasts.
- Establish family gatherings in the evenings or weekends (e.g., family fun nights and multicultural potlucks).
- Establish committees to address home-school issues.
- Offer workshops where parents and school personnel learn together about a mutual topic of interest or pending change in educational practice.
- Hold regular office hours (e.g., principal's hour).

Underscore the importance of both in-school time and out-of-school time (shared responsibility) for children's engagement with schooling and learning.

- State the importance of positive attitudes and actions at both home and school.
- Share information about ways families create positive learning environments.
- Discuss and negotiate roles and responsibilities.
- Use terms that promote partnerships, such as "we" and "us."
- Structure back-to-school nights and/or early conferences to discuss teacher, parent, and student goals for a productive school year.

family members tend to react subjectively when addressing concerns related to their child's individual progress and needs. Educators, on the other hand, may take a more logical approach to addressing student concerns. Further, they typically see individual student issues in the context of the entire classroom group. These contextual differences can result in communication difficulties if the differing perspectives are not discussed and understood.

Contextual differences also may come into play during problem solving. Educators and families experience the child primarily in different environments—the classroom and at home, respectively. It may be hard to imagine that the child behaves differently in different environments, but this is often the case. It is important for educators and families to explore any assumptions they may have and resolve to learn as much as they can from each other.

Differences are not necessarily detrimental to family-school relationships. In fact, different perspectives are healthy in collaborative relationships (Christenson & Sheridan, 2001). The challenge is to share concerns and find ways to create win-win resolutions for conflicts.

Sample practices for resolving conflicts. Current practices stress the acquisition of conflict resolution skills to manage conflict effectively and strengthen the development of constructive partnerships (Margolis & Brannigan, 1990). Nonadversarial approaches for managing conflicts typically consist of at least three well-developed skills:

- **Consensus.** Schools are finding that structured problem solving that aims toward consensus (e.g., agree to try the plan) tends to satisfy the needs of parents, teachers, and students and facilitate constructive interaction. Although, the details of consensus-based conflict resolution structures may vary, all follow a variation of the following steps: Identify the desired outcome or goal, explore values and perspectives about the goal, discuss factors that enhance or impede goal attainment, explore options for achieving the goal, develop a plan, and evaluate movement toward the goal. [An example of a consensus building approach is found in the sidebar, *Parent-Educator Problem Solving (PEPS)*.]
- **Negotiation skills.** Educators use negotiation skills, such as viewing the person apart from the concern and developing a win-win perspective when resolving conflicts. With negotiation, communication is focused on mutual interests (e.g., how both parties can work together to support the student's learning and academic success).
- **Dealing with anger.** When a family member is angry, educators should employ supportive strategies. Some examples include meeting with parents as soon as possible, allowing parents an opportunity to tell their story paired with empathic listening, acting as a problem solver, and focusing on present and future interactions. Employing a mediator is a viable strategy should the situation be either extremely intense or characterized by seemingly intractable differences.

“Structured problem solving that purposefully includes information sharing, particularly about resources and constraints at school or at home, is essential. In structured problem solving, team participants must be concerned first with understanding, and second with being understood.”

Christenson & Sheridan
2001

Parent-Educator Problem Solving (PEPS)

Introduction

- Build rapport.
- Describe school (or parent)-based concern.
- Express concerns as learning goals (what the child needs to learn; what we want to teach the child).
- Invite parent assistance and express interest in working as partners.

Identification

- Identify all concerns and perspectives related to school-based concern.
- Gather parent input and reframe as learning goals.
- Identify mutual learning goals: List and prioritize goals, select one goal to work on collaboratively. [Note: Parties may decide parent and teacher will work independently on some goals.]
- Check for understanding. Restate mutual goal as a discrepancy between actual and desired child behavior/performance. Establish a common effort to close this discrepancy. Check on other contributing factors relevant to concerns.

Selection

- Generate possibilities for a solution by using brainstorming while listing all ideas (do not engage in evaluation). Select idea(s) from the list.
- Provide supportive facilitation: Ask parents and teachers: "What resources and/or information would you find helpful for attaining the goal?" [Note: Mutual decision making for community resource involvement often occurs.]

Implementation/Evaluation

- Describe the solution plan.
- Review roles and responsibilities.
- Engage in perception checking.
- Determine an evaluation date.
- Implement the plan.
- Identify way to make contact if necessary (e.g., no phones).
- Follow-up by a case manager.
- Evaluate effectiveness of "our" plan.
- Determine whether the discrepancy was closed.
- If not, replan (no blaming).
- If so, celebrate!

Source: Christenson, S.L. (1995). Supporting home-school collaboration. In A. Thomas & J. Grimes (Eds.), *Best practices in school psychology III* (pp. 253-267). Washington, DC: National Association of School Psychologists.

Most win-win conflict resolution approaches also assume the development of constructive attitudes (e.g., blaming the other party undermines positive win-win resolutions). One practice involves introducing perspective in the face of conflict. When presented with a conflict, educators seek two-way communication with families by asking:

- What is the issue or concern?
- What do I need to say about the issue and have I phrased it in concrete, observable language?
- What do I need to understand from the family about the issue?
- How can we develop a better plan or practice to address the concern?

Including Families in Problem Solving and Decision Making

The success of problem solving and shared decision making relies on the effectiveness of two-way communication and the presence of attitudes that facilitate partnerships.

Problem solving with families. Problem solving can be thought of as a tool that enables families and educators to work together to achieve a positive climate aimed at improving student learning (Sheridan, Cowan, & Eagle, 2000). Educators find that problem solving is beneficial because they can:

- Refrain from diagnosing problems and strive to develop cooperative relationships with parents to best meet the needs of the child.
- Focus on the strengths of families as active and meaningful participants in the child's education.
- Create mutual support for interventions and activities to improve the educational experience of students.

Problem solving, regardless of the specific model or approach, follows a step-by-step structure. Six steps provide a useful template for problem solving with families at many schools. They include:

- Identify and define the problem or concern.
- Analyze conditions surrounding the concern.
- Brainstorm alternative solutions.
- Select the most appropriate solution and develop a plan.
- Implement the plan.
- Evaluate outcomes.

Schools are encouraged to tailor the process to their own situations. [*Note:* For additional resources on problem solving models, see Conjoint Behavioral Consultation (Sheridan, Kratochwill, & Bergan, 1996), DECIDE (Welch, 1999), Family-School Meetings (Weiss & Edwards, 1992), Problem Solving Conferences (Canter & Canter, 1991), Parent-Educator Problem Solving (PEPS) (Christenson & Sheridan, 2001; Christenson, 1995), and Solution-Oriented Family-School Meetings (Carlson, Hickman, & Horton, 1992).]

Decision making with families. Shared decision making is more than problem solving; it is a process in which parents have a voice, provide input, and share ownership. Shared decision making does not allow for certain factions to make decisions outside of the meeting (e.g., educators discuss the assessment results and corresponding plan for placement before meeting with the family). Similarly, shared decision making does not mean that only families have a right to identify the child's needs. Rather, shared input among all parties is considered equally important in the final decision about the student's educational program and instruction.

In shared decision making—as well as problem solving—the relationship between home and school is given priority. Both parents and educators pay attention to the quality of the relationship and their connection for the benefit of students. This connection is as important as the final decision or intervention plan (Weiss & Edwards, 1992).

Parent-professional discourse should provide official channels for reciprocal rather than one-way discourse between educators and parents (Harry, 1992). Schools are finding that when educators actively engage parents in meaningful roles, they enhance equality in decision making. To accomplish meaningful dialogue, professionals should ensure that families are actively involved throughout the decision making process. Suggestions for accomplishing this include (Harry, 1992):

- Place parents in a meaningful, active role during conferences.
- Encourage professionals to better understand parents' intimate knowledge of their children, including the many experiences and cultural aspects that may account for children's development, learning, and behavioral patterns.
- Signal in a concrete way that parent input is needed and valued.
- Provide opportunities for information sharing across home and school cultures.
- Suggest natural support networks to parents.

Enhancing Learning at Home

Educators have recognized for many years that students' academic, social, and behavioral competence is associated with strong home support for learning. Recent

research confirms that learning at home and outside of school differentiates high and low achievers in many schools (Alexander, Entwisle, & Olson, 2001). For example, students in grades 7 through 12 who received grades of C or lower also reported receiving less home support for learning than their higher achieving peers (Binns, Steinberg, & Amorosi, 1997). Home predictors of school success include (Kellaghan, Sloane, Alvarez, & Bloom, 1993):

- Work habits of the family.
- Academic guidance and support.
- Stimulation to explore and discuss ideas and events.
- Language environment (opportunities for good language habits).
- Academic aspirations and expectations.

Sample practices for enhancing learning at home. One way to organize practices for enhancing learning at home is to categorize them according to the following purposes:

- **Share information.** Some schools have chosen to inform parents about family influences that are associated with greater school success. They have conducted well designed, carefully crafted media blitzes; provided tip sheets for parents; summarized information in newsletters; and made resources available through lending libraries. Also, schools have designed informational flyers about conditions at school and home that help students develop positive habits for learning (Christenson & Peterson, 1998). An example is provided in the sidebar, *Creating Conditions for Student Success*. These efforts reinforce the idea that home, school, and community influences are important for learning and that the consistency in messages between families, educators, and the general public must be considered.
- **Attention to parental needs.** Increasingly, families are experiencing stress that can interfere with their school involvement (e.g., working more than one job, health crises). Information alone may be insufficient for supporting families in enhancing learning at home. Schools also may need to support families by being a resource for parents about their children's schooling (Christenson, Hurley, Sheridan, & Fenstermacher, 1997). One successful approach is the identification of another individual who might support the child's learning. Sometimes older siblings, grandparents, and neighbors serve in this capacity. In some cases, schools have been helpful in making referrals to outside agencies that provide support to families.
- **Ongoing or additional support.** Some families desire and benefit from additional support to enhance learning at home. School personnel have found that workshops or parent discussion groups may offer such support. When organizing these opportunities, it is important to provide logistical support for parents (e.g., transportation, food) and incentives, and affirm parents' expertise by emphasizing the sharing of ideas. Encourage families to pick topics that they care about (e.g., goal setting with children, promoting positive school behavior, importance of homework, enhancing parent-child communication, helping chil-

“Enhancing learning at home has been described as the meat and potatoes of parent involvement.”

Rich, 1987

Creating Conditions for Student Success

Students are influenced by the extent to which educators and families provide conditions that encourage and support their learning. The following six factors are key to helping students achieve to their potential.

Standards and Expectations

Academic achievement is positively correlated with realistic, high parent and teacher expectations for children's performance. Student success in school is facilitated when families and educators clearly state expectations for student performance, set specific goals and standards for desired behavior and performance, discuss expectations with youth, emphasize children's effort when completing tasks, and ensure youth understand the consequences for not meeting expectations.

At home, families:

- Communicate that effort and a positive attitude in school are expected.
- Support their children and encourage them to strive for good grades (e.g., have children teach other family members one thing they learned in school each day).

In school, educators:

- Base their expectations on student performance.
- Write specific behavioral objectives that are observable and measurable.
- Make all classroom expectations clear (e.g., students understand that assignments are to be neat and turned in on time).

In the community, the public:

- Shares values for education.
- Sets high standards for public behavior.

Structure

Structure refers to the overall routine and monitoring provided by key adults for youth. Students' success in school is facilitated when families and schools provide a consistent pattern of events and age appropriate monitoring and supervision. Students perform better in school when they understand their schedule of daily activities, directions for schoolwork, rules for behavior, etc.

At home, families:

- Reinforce routine daily events (e.g., eating dinner together, completing homework, and bed times).
- Hold children accountable for completing household tasks and chores.

In school, educators:

- Make all rules and procedures clear to students (e.g., students know what to do when they have completed the assigned task).
- Remind students of behavioral expectations and standards prior to unique or novel activities (e.g., field trips, assemblies, guest speakers etc.).

In the community, the public:

- Provides interesting, challenging programs for youth that promote productive use of time.
- Cultivates a feeling of cohesiveness and a collective sense of well being and physical security.

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Creating Conditions for Student Success (continued)

Opportunity to Learn

A variety of learning options should be available to children in the home, at school, and within the community. Success in school is facilitated when youth are provided with various tools for learning such as: reading materials, access to clubs and organizations, varied teaching strategies, and time to practice/master new skills. It also is enhanced when the key adults in a youth's life communicate with each other.

At home, families:

- Involve their children in extracurricular activities (e.g., youth groups, sports or music lessons).
- Spend time with children discussing current events.

In school, educators:

- Provide students with instructional support as necessary (e.g., prompts and cues to help students answer a question).
- Work toward mastery of the subject area (e.g., students are able to complete tasks independently during practice at a 90 percent criterion).

In the community, the public:

- Provides youth with community services and programs.
- Makes available opportunities for children to converse with other adults.

Support

On an ongoing basis, adults should support student progress. Student progress is facilitated when adults give frequent verbal support and praise; provide the youth with regular, explicit feedback; talk directly to youth about schoolwork and activities; and teach problem solving and negotiation skills.

At home, parents:

- Are involved in the child's school (e.g., participate in school events, spend time working with the child on school-related topics, belong to the PTA).
- Recognize the child's effort and progress (e.g., give a high five for a 10 point improvement on a math test).

In school, educators:

- Contact the family at the first sign of a problem.
- Provide students with specific, immediate, and frequent feedback about their behavior and progress (e.g., recognize improvements, not just perfection).

In the community, the public:

- Forms collaborative partnerships across agencies and organizations for the benefit of youth.
- Provides guidance and recognition to children.

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Creating Conditions for Student Success (continued)

Climate/Relationships

Climate/relationships is about how adults in the home, in the school, and in the community help youth to be learners. It refers to the amount of warmth, friendliness, praise, recognition, and respect adults show to children. Relationships between students and adults are facilitated by cooperative and accepting environments, a nonblaming relationship between home and school, and adult encouragement, praise, and involvement in the youth's life.

At home, families:

- Form positive adult-child relationships.
- Talk and listen to children on a regular basis.

In school, educators:

- Create a classroom climate that is warm, friendly, and accepting of all students.
- Listen to students' opinions and ideas (e.g., demonstrate interest by nodding, eye contact, etc.).

In the community, the public:

- Provides an environment that recognizes individual and group accomplishments.
- Offers competent and caring adults that provide youth with guidance during a crisis.

Modeling

Students benefit from adult demonstrations of desired behaviors. They also benefit when adults show the value of learning and education in their actions and words.

At home, families:

- Model the value of education by using reading and math in the home (e.g., balance a checkbook, read a book).
- Admit when they are wrong and listen to suggestions from the child.

In school, educators:

- Demonstrate the desired classroom behavior (e.g., talking softly during work time).
- Model classroom guidelines and rules (e.g., listens to students, doesn't chew gum, drink pop, etc.).

In the community, the public:

- Offers adult mentoring programs to teach appropriate behaviors and decision making skills to youth involved in high risk behaviors.
- Provides sources of support for youth (e.g., counseling, drop-in centers).

Source: Christenson, S. L., & Peterson, C. J. (1998). *Family, school, and community influences on children's learning: Creating conditions for success* (Report No. 1). Minneapolis, MN: All Parents Are Teachers Project, University of Minnesota Extension Service.

dren manage anger, problem-solving strategies with children, and home learning opportunities).

Many schools are using partnership agreements to enhance learning at home. Such an agreement invites parents and students to be partners, clarifies the roles and responsibilities between the partners, and maintains a clear focus on student goals and progress. Such contracts also can serve as a useful home-school tool for ongoing communication about a student's learning.

Educators are accustomed to writing behavioral and academic contracts for individual students who are having difficulty. Another practice is to extend this practice to all students before a problem is observed. A home-school-student partnership agreement is created at the beginning of the school year (U. S. Department of Education, 1997). When using partnership agreements, it is important to determine the roles and responsibilities of the partners and develop a system for monitoring implementation. School personnel have found that use of these agreements provides an opportunity to discuss conditions at home and school that influence student learning.

The concept of shared responsibility also can be applied to the Individualized Education Program (IEP) process or Section 504 accommodation plans for students with disabilities. For example, families can agree to assume specific responsibilities that support the child's progress toward IEP goals and objectives or benchmarks.

Family involvement in homework is another way to enhance student learning. Both academic (e.g., direct teaching and assistance is available) and motivational (e.g., child's progress and improvement are recognized) support for learning is emphasized (Bempechat, 1998). For example, families can improve learning at home and performance at school by valuing, monitoring, and helping with schoolwork (Scott-Jones, 1995). If parents can't help with homework because of literacy or work issues, their value for learning can be demonstrated by helping to find an individual who can assist or by discussing with students what they are studying.

Engaging Uninvolved Families

Schools have found that it is never a good idea to ignore family disengagement or lack of involvement. They also have found that their outreach efforts must create a spirit of cooperation to meet children's needs (Edwards, 1992).

Families who do not participate in the school, especially if school personnel have made attempts to involve them, can be viewed as uninterested. However, there are many reasons for an unwillingness to be involved (e.g., a history of negative inter-

actions, lack of confidence that the school has anything to offer that would make involvement worth the effort, inconvenience). Even under the most frustrating conditions, however, educators still must continue to build nonjudgmental and respectful relationships.

Thorough and persistent efforts may be needed to involve some families with their children's school and with their learning. To understand how to engage some families, it is helpful to realize the importance of meeting them on their own level. Family empowerment is a process, not an end in itself. It begins with encouraging parental sense of self-efficacy (i.e., parents able to see their ability to contribute), advances to providing opportunities for parents to build relationships with teachers or other parents, and ends with asking parents to take social action (e.g., decision making).

Sample practices to engage uninvolved families. Successful school practices systematically identify families who are not responding to current outreach activities. Educators reach out to them through personal contacts (e.g., positive phone calls, home visits). The content of such contacts always stresses the importance of family involvement in improving the child's school success. It also may include:

- Information sharing (e.g., the child's school performance, the importance of family involvement).
- Discussions regarding the family's views of involvement, the identification of barriers to participation, and ways the school may support the family in participating.
- Problem solving (e.g., identification of the students' needs, generation of intervention strategies).

Successful school practices respect family goals for their children's education. It is very helpful to explore with families what they want schools to accomplish and to understand their hopes and desires for their children (Malatchi, 1997; Thorp, 1997). An emphasis is placed on supporting families in educating their children in ways they see fit.

However, families also need to understand that unless they make education a top priority, optimal school performance of students should not be expected (Bempechat, 1998). Family participation tends to be more broad in scope and better sustained when family members believe their participation is directly linked to their children's performance (Rich, 1987).

Finally, successful school practices are thorough and persistent. Regular, ongoing contact is made with families.

"The difference between parents who participate and those who do not is that those who do have recognized that they are a critical part in their children's education."

Delgado-Gaitan, 1991

[*Note: A summary of additional ideas for reaching uninvolved families appears in the sidebar *Reflection: Reaching Uninvolved Families.**]

Summary

Working with parents as partners often requires changes in school practices. To make room at the table for parents—all parents, not just those who are most easily reached—educators should focus on the process for creating positive working relationships. Working as partners with parents is primarily an attitude—not only an activity to be implemented. Paying attention to how the intervention points are implemented will be integral to a school's success for forming collaborative family-school relationships for children's learning.

Reflection: Reaching Uninvolved Families

Are families considered a resource?

Do school personnel:

- Help families maintain a sense of power, dignity, and authority in rearing their children?
- Demonstrate mutual respect, critical reflection, and caring?
- Find opportunities for families to provide input and make decisions about their children's learning?

Are family roles and responsibilities negotiated?

Do school personnel:

- Explain the importance of family influences for children's learning?
- Expect families to be involved?
- Clarify how families can help and provide options?
- Encourage families to be assertive and share their truth?
- Allow families to decide how they will help?

Have barriers been addressed?

Have school personnel:

- Made contact with families early in the school year?
- Established ongoing communication systems that include good news as well as sharing concerns with a way to dialogue and share resources to address concerns?
- Used two-way communication formats (e.g., telephone calls, home visits, assignment/communication notebook, community liaisons)?
- Focused their conversations on the knowledge and interests of individual families (e.g., explain the importance of their involvement and ask them how they want to contribute to the school/classroom and their child's learning)?

Do families feel they are partners in meeting their children's needs?

Have school personnel:

- Explored families' expectations for schools?
- Devised opportunities for involvement that families see as practical and meaningful?
- Reached out to families with warmth and sensitivity on a consistent basis?
- Developed an ongoing workshop program in which families and staff are both teachers and learners?
- Acknowledged that sharing power with families provides an opportunity to understand their interests and goals, and to learn ways to achieve them.

Have practices been implemented to involve uninvolved families?

Have school personnel:

- Used welcoming strategies (e.g., personal invitations in native language, translators)?
- Planned for logistical barriers (e.g., daycare, transportation)?
- Invited family assistance and input when addressing school-based concerns?
- Kept the focus of interaction child centered and solution oriented (e.g., what can be done to foster the child's progress)?
- Offered fun events that also may meet a family need (e.g., raffles, contests, meals)?
- Used community outreach (e.g., meet in neutral sites, home visits)?
- Identified influential family and community members who will spread good messages about the school?
- Surveyed families to determine the reason for noninvolvement?
- Examined family recruitment procedures to ensure they are appropriate?

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Reflection:

Reaching Uninvolved Families

(continued)

Have school communication practices been examined?

Do school personnel:

- Treat communication as a two-way, reciprocal, shared responsibility?
- Provide avenues for families to initiate contact if they have an idea, question, or concern?
- Know how to create situations in which families feel comfortable sharing their thoughts and ideas?
- Elicit, value, and use family input on a regular basis?
- Review family-school communications to determine how often, and under what circumstances, interactions occur between educators and families that foster the development of positive, working relationships or result in negative contacts?

Source: Edwards, P. A. (1992). Strategies and techniques for establishing home-school partnerships with minority parents. In A. Barona & E. Garcia (Eds.), *Children at-risk: Poverty, minority status, and other issues in educational equity* (pp. 217-236). Silver Spring, MD: National Association of School Psychologists.

CHAPTER

5

Finding Additional Resources

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Christenson, S.L., & Sheridan, S.M. (2001). *Schools and families: Creating essential connections for learning*. New York: Guilford Press.

Designed to help school practitioners and educators build positive connections with families and enhance student learning, the book describes four critical process variables that underlie strong partnerships: approach, attitudes, atmosphere, and actions; and provides a useful self-assessment inventory to guide practitioners in evaluating these variables in their own programs and schools. In particular, key pathways by which professionals and parents can develop common goals for learning and behavior, a shared sense of accountability, better communication, and a willingness to listen and value different perspectives in the design of educational programs are emphasized.

Comer, J. P., Haynes, N. M., Joyner, E. T., & Ben-Avie, M. (1996). *Rallying the whole village: The Comer process for reforming education*. New York: Teachers College Press.

This inspiring, practical book describes the highly successful School Development Program (SDP) developed by Comer and initiated in the New Haven, Connecticut, school district in 1968. Since its initiation, the SDP has been implemented in more than 700 schools and has resulted in improved achievement of students. The book describes three principles that guide the SDP: consensus, collaboration, and no-fault. The program involves three teams—the Parent Team, School Planning and Management Team, and Student and Staff Support Team—that carry out three operations: Comprehensive School Plan, Staff Development, and Assessment and Modification. The goal of SDP is described as child and adolescent growth along six developmental pathways: physical, psychological, language, ethical, cognitive, and social.

Epstein, J.L. (2001). *School, family, and community partnerships: Preparing educators and improving schools*. Boulder, CO: Westview.

This comprehensive volume provides educators with a framework for conceptualizing, planning, and implementing programs for school and family partnerships. The volume includes a review of the research on the implementation and effects of partnerships, outlines six types of involvement for creating partnerships, and provides examples of practices to use in elementary, middle, and high schools. It addresses how teachers and administrators can prepare themselves to create positive relationships and productive partnerships with families.

Hoover-Dempsey, K. V., & Sandler, H. M. (1997). Why do parents become involved in their children's education? *Review of Educational Research*, 67(1), 3–42.

Based on psychological theory and research, this insightful review highlights three constructs proposed as central for understanding why parents become involved in their children's education. Issues related to how parents perceive and construct their roles as parents, parental self-efficacy, and involvement messages from the school offer implications for both researchers and practitioners interested in enhancing family involvement.

Liontos, L. B. (1992). *At-risk families and schools: Becoming partners* (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. EA 023 283). Eugene, OR: ERIC.

This 150-page manual is an excellent, readable synthesis of theory, research, and specific programs about home-school collaboration for at-risk populations. Topics include communication, home as an educative environment, school readiness, home learning, and decision making. Particular emphasis is placed on early intervention, dropout prevention, and supporting and strengthening families. Elements of successful programs and information on reaching families are detailed.

National P. T. A. (2000). *Building successful partnerships: A guide for developing parent and family involvement programs*. Bloomington, IN: National Educational Service.

The six National Standards for Parent/Family Involvement Programs (Communicating, Parenting, Student Learning, Volunteering, School Decision Making and Advocacy, and Collaborating with the Community) provide the framework for this informative, useful book. It will be of interest to anyone designing and evaluating parent involvement programs. Other resources include strategies for overcoming barriers and developing action teams, and reproducible position statements, surveys, forms, and worksheets helpful for developing family involvement programs.

