

## Parent Involvement: It's a piece of cake

by Maria Chesley Fisk, Ph.D.

For our schools to be successful, we need our parents. Despite No Child Left Behind's mandates, parent involvement remains an elephant in the room in most of our schools – it does not get talked about much, even though evidence and intuition tell us families are a huge influence on student achievement. We need a new collective mindset about parent involvement: parent involvement is a potentially powerful lever parents and schools can use to create meaningful increases in student learning. It includes the parental efforts and attitudes that impact children at home – largely invisible to schools – as well as the volunteering and help with homework more traditionally thought of as parent involvement. And it's a piece of cake....you'll see what I mean.

Start with this: Kids are in school 14% of the year. And this: As much as half of the variance in students' test scores is explained by home-related factors; only about 20% is explained by schools (Marzano, 2003, pp. 121-153; Leithwood & Anderson, 2010). Regardless of the family's income, ethnicity, or culture, children whose families are more involved have better grades, attendance, behavior, and graduation rates (Henderson & Mapp, 2002). Research supports the idea that families have more influence than schools on how well students achieve in both elementary (Desforges & Abouchar, 2003) and high school (Dufur, Parcel, & Troutman, 2013; Houtenville & Conway, 2008). Indeed, an involved parent's contributions to student achievement are valued at around \$1000 in additional per pupil spending (Houtenville & Conway, 2008).

All parents and educators want to help their children succeed, and together we can negotiate the sometimes tricky boundary dynamics between school and home (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2001), particularly if we are willing to look at our beliefs and practices with fresh eyes (Souto-Manning & Swick, 2006; Price-Mitchell, 2009). The research base (see reviews, for example Harris & Goodall, 2007; Henderson & Mapp, 2002; Desforges & Abouchar, 2003; Epstein, 2011; Harvard Family Research Project, 2006-2007) provides a reasonable consensus on what individual families do that helps their children succeed in school. I represent this consensus in a birthday cake model educators and parents can use as a springboard for reflection and action. The cake – the most important part, what matters the most – happens at home: holding high expectations and maintaining pro-learning and pro-health homes. Parental attitudes and habits are at least as important as any particular actions. The candles on

“The family seems to be the most effective and economical system for fostering and sustaining the child's development. Without family involvement, intervention is likely to be unsuccessful, and what few effects are achieved are likely to disappear once the intervention is discontinued.”

- Urie Bronfenbrenner, Co-Founder of Head Start

the cake – very nice to have, but a cake is a cake without them – are about the business of school: volunteering, getting homework done, communicating with school, attending school events, and participating in school governance.



## The Parental Attitudes and Efforts that Help Students Succeed

**Holding high expectations.** Parents communicate high and reasonable expectations in a variety of caring ways: being aware of and asking about their child’s school performance regularly, helping him set goals and sharing in the joy when they are achieved, talking about and expecting him to go to college or other post-high school education. Holding high and reasonable expectations for children’s achievement includes valuing all that is needed for school success, particularly hard work and persistence (Duckworth & Eskreis-Winkler, 2013), self-control, good citizenship, and a positive attitude.

**Providing a pro-learning home environment.** A child knows learning is important when she sees her adult family members reading, discussing complex issues (OECD, 2012), learning and trying new things - and when her parents involve her in doing the same. In pro-learning homes, an attitude of love and respect is accompanied by

frequent and open communication (Jeynes, 2010). This translates into adults taking an active interest in what their child is learning at school and at home, providing behavioral boundaries, encouraging productive work habits, and aiming for her time to be spent wisely. Indeed, parents' role in influencing how their child thinks of herself as a learner is vitally important (Desforges & Abouchaar, 2003), and helping her cultivate a growth mindset (Dweck, 2006), a confidence that she can learn and achieve if she sets her mind to it. Notably, research does not support the notion that parents need to be able to teach subject matter (Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1997; Hornby & Lafaele, 2011, p. 40).

**Ensuring children's health: Adequate sleep, nutrition, and exercise.** Common sense tells us students need to feel safe, have regular and sufficient sleep, healthy meals, and exercise to concentrate and do their best work, both in the short- and long-term. Basic good health looms large on the list of important factors for learning and student success, yet we rarely give it much more than lip service in schools (The Council of the Chief State School Officers, 2004; Action for Healthy Kids, 2004). Educators may not feel basic health is in their span of control, but parents do.

**Specific efforts can be the icing on the cake for student learning.** The "icing (or in this case candles) on the cake" efforts are usually indirectly tied to student learning and important to student success primarily because they demonstrate to children that school is important to their parents. **Attending school events** like parent-teacher-student conferences that specifically address the student's progress sends an essential message. While at first glance, **managing homework completion** might be thought to be directly related to content learning, it needn't be. In fact, parental help with the content of homework – as opposed to the management of the process of completing homework – may or may not help the student achieve. That said, there is evidence direct help with the content of homework may raise student achievement, mainly at the elementary level and particularly if schools advise parents about how to help with homework effectively (Patall, Cooper, & Robinson, 2008).

Without a doubt, a component of parent involvement for student success is families' contributions to school success. **Volunteering, attending school events** like back-to-school night, and **contributing to school governance** have an indirect effect on student learning but important effects on overall school success. They often require considerable time and physically going to school which poses a significant challenge for many parents. And frankly, individual children's achievement is unlikely to suffer

"The amount of time spent reading or talking with children is less important than simply engaging in these activities as much as is feasible."

- from Let's Read Them a Story! The Parent Factor in Education, a 2012 report from the Programme for International Student Assessment

because their families don't take on all of the "candles." Parents who are unable or choose not to participate in these ways may be masters of the attitudes and efforts in the cake – productively and lovingly involved with their children at home. But the parents who do participate send a strong message to their children: School is important and deserves my time and energy. In addition, parents involved at school can build supportive and informative relationships with educators and other parents that can help them navigate the school system.

The importance of collective parent efforts at many of today's schools cannot be overstated. Many parent groups' Herculean volunteering and fundraising efforts fill in budgetary holes where staff salaries, computers, professional development and other "extras" used to be. Schools with these sorts of parent involvement literally have more people and resources to support students. So it should come as no surprise that schools with higher parent involvement also have higher overall school health and teacher satisfaction (MetLife, 2012).

## **How Schools Can Harness the Power of Parent Involvement for Student Achievement**

The cake model can help us wisely target our efforts to increasing student achievement. For both educators and families, improving parent involvement for learning can be more about working smarter than working harder.

Whether and how parents get involved is heavily influenced by schools (Hoover-Dempsey, 2005). All parents care and want to do their best for their children; and all can reflect and adjust their parenting practice. Schools must take the lead to ensure all families are effectively included, know how to support their children, and are encouraged and given opportunities for support. It's true enough that schools cannot easily change family income or education level, but they can support and influence families' attitudes and efforts around holding high expectations and providing a pro-learning and pro-health home.

The basics of school-inspired parent involvement are building productive relationships and communication between the people at home and the people at school. Their quality determines the likelihood that school-inspired efforts will move the needle on student achievement. The two are intertwined – together relationships and communication focused on student learning make a meaningful difference.

**Relationships.** Relationships are built on trust, mutual respect, and common interests. Educators and families start with a substantial interest in common: raising an academically successful, well-adjusted graduate. And we have much to learn from each other: Families are uniquely situated as people who have known the child his or her WHOLE life—they've got the history and they've got the future. Often more than teachers, parents take the long view and pay attention to children's development as life-long learners (Warner, 2010) and their

development of character traits like self-control, perseverance, and kindness. Educators, on the other hand, understand the student’s strengths and areas for growth in school. Furthermore educators know how schools work and can advise families about such things as course requirements and opportunities for extra support. Critical for relationship building, we should seek to know each other as individuals and to understand the social communities within which we operate. We should actively assume that everyone – even those who take a very different approach than we think we would in their shoes - has good intentions and is doing the best they can.

**Communication focused on student learning.** Positive relationships based on respect and mutual trust require ongoing communication and face-to-face interaction as often as feasible. From a school perspective, other key components are differentiated communication that meets each family where they are and an inviting, welcoming climate. Also helpful is encouraging parents to be prepared to communicate and interact with the schools their child will attend as they advance through school – in most cases, this means getting online. In today’s world of online assignments and grades, parents need to be online to support their child and schools have a role to play in helping them get there.

One-way communication, typically school to home, is necessary to handle school and class logistics. In addition, a primary goal of one-way communication should be to ensure parents aren’t left hanging when the answer to “What did you do at school today?” is “Nothing.” If parents know what is happening at school before it happens, they are in a position to help their child prepare and look forward to school activities.

“...although both voluntary expressions of parental involvement and school-based family involvement programs may have some degree of efficacy independent of one another, cooperation and coordination between the home and the school enhances the impact of both.”

-William H. Jeynes, Professor of Education writing for the Harvard Family Research Project

To build collaborative relationships that truly promote student learning, communication must be two-way (school and parent) and three-way (school, parent, and student). Two- and three-way communication at its best allows families and schools to work together in ways that ease the struggles, enhance joyful celebrations of progress, and ultimately help raise a confident and accomplished learner. Two- and three-way communication allows families and professional educators to learn about the child’s progress wherever it is happening, as it is happening, not just after the test or end of the term. It also allows teachers to share suggestions as to what families can do at home and allows families to share how it went and further the conversation and learning process.

## Actionable Next Steps for educators and parent leaders:

**1. Do something today.** One quick thing. Pick a low-hanging fruit. You could send home a list of questions parents can ask their students about what they are learning in school or tell parents how important it is they hold high and reasonable expectations for their child. If you think parents don't want to be involved, try a new attitude: Remember school folks will not see the lion's share of what parents do to enable student achievement. Value each thing they accomplish for the benefit of their child – getting them to and from school, clean and clothed. If you think further involving parents in school will invite headaches, consider the potential costs versus benefits and how focusing parent involvement efforts on increasing student learning specifically might make a difference. A little something every week – even if you only do this – can have an impact over the long run.

**2. Assess where you are.** Take stock of your current practices around parent involvement - those being undertaken voluntarily and those actively encouraged by the school. For a more formal assessment, the Harvard Graduate School of Education has developed a sound, research-based survey designed to provide important insights into your parents' current practices and their perceptions of the school's efforts around parent involvement. Although the survey is designed to be used in its entirety, parents' responses to a more limited number of questions will still be helpful. (You can learn more at <http://www.surveymonkey.com/mp/harvard-education-surveys/>). Other questionnaires have been developed in Ohio (<http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/pandfis.pdf>), Michigan ([http://www.michigan.gov/documents/mde/ParentSchoolPartnership\\_305695\\_7.pdf](http://www.michigan.gov/documents/mde/ParentSchoolPartnership_305695_7.pdf)), California (<http://csps.wested.org/>), and Ontario ([http://www.ontariodirectors.ca/Parent\\_Engagement/PA%20Downloads/34919\\_CODE\\_Guidebook-ENG.pdf](http://www.ontariodirectors.ca/Parent_Engagement/PA%20Downloads/34919_CODE_Guidebook-ENG.pdf)).

**3. Create a long-term plan.** Adjust or adopt new practices that both encourage and support parent involvement in student learning and school success. Knowing “what gets measured gets done,” teachers and schools should include parent involvement in professional growth or school improvement goals. Get a clear understanding of WHY you want parents to be involved (for example, to enhance our efforts to raise reading comprehension) and WHAT you want them to know and do (for example, develop the habit of shared reading and support students' reading for understanding). Predict how you will get there, articulate how you will differentiate and get parents and professionals engaged and how you will keep them engaged. Partners in the community may be able to support parent involvement programs are associated with higher student achievement (Jeynes, 2012), and those that match your goals are worth considering.

Boiling parent involvement down to the critical, research-based parts that impact student learning can help make parent-driven and school-inspired parent involvement plans more purposeful and manageable. The categories of parent involvement for learning will stand the test of time because parents, particularly when supported by and working in collaboration with their child's school, are powerful allies in achievement efforts. For most of us, changing our habits and mindsets about parents' roles will take effort. But when we see the impact of the results, encouraging parent involvement will be a piece of cake.

### **Helpful resources for school-inspired parent involvement:**

*Beyond the Bake Sale: The Essential Guide to Family-School Partnerships (2007)* by Anne T. Henderson, Karen L. Mapp, Vivian R. Johson, and Don Davies

*101 Ways to Create Real Family Engagement (2008)* by Steve Constantino

The Council of Ontario Directors of Education has produced three very helpful documents available at [http://www.ontariodirectors.ca/Parent\\_Engagement/Parent\\_Engagement.html](http://www.ontariodirectors.ca/Parent_Engagement/Parent_Engagement.html):

*Planning Parent Engagement: A Guidebook for Parents and Schools*

*Parent Tool Kit: What parents can do to help their child succeed in school*

*Parent Tool Kit: Teens Edition*

*PTA National Standards for Family-School Partnerships: An Implementation Guide (2009)*

*School, Family, and Community Partnerships: Preparing Educators and Improving Schools, Second edition (2011)* by Joyce L. Epstein

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