



Help Schools by Partnering with Teacher Education Programs

By Gwendolyn Benson, PhD, and Susan Ogletree, PhD

Traditionally, parents and PTAs have stayed out of the business of teacher education—but things are about to change! Beginning teachers, as well as veterans, have long been unsure about how to involve and engage parents and PTAs in meaningful support for student academic achievement. Despite research showing that parent involvement has a crucial influence on student academic success, many teacher education programs neglect to include this vital area in their curriculum. No longer can parents and PTAs be relegated to the sidelines as secondary supporters. It is up to parents and PTAs to be informed, attentive, and active not only in the lives of their students and respective schools, but also in the local, state, and national discussions around the development of preservice and inservice teachers.

For the past 10 years, schools have been required by the federal Elementary and Secondary Education Act-No Child Left Behind (ESEA-NCLB) to develop meaningful family engagement practices that provide welcoming environments to parents. However, for parents who have had negative experiences in school, either as a student or through interacting with their child's teacher and school staff, feeling truly comfortable and welcome may not come easy. Schools themselves often do not know how to change ingrained patterns that may have excluded parents. Work must be done in teacher preparation programs to determine how best to encourage positive relationships and provide education students with appropriate instruction in parent engagement.

A trusting relationship can be built through effective school-to-home and home-to-school communication on all matters, both positive and negative. The communication should not end with parent-teacher conferences, newsletters, or greetings at the school door, but also should include engagement of parents and families in school planning. Such engagement includes helping to make decision on such things as

- school uniforms
- study trips
- new playground equipment

- extracurricular activities and afterschool programs
- recruitment of community partners, and
- parent nights

Parents should also be given meaningful volunteer opportunities throughout the school year and a leadership voice as full members of the local school councils and school leadership teams. Parent engagement in these types of activities can lead to a more trusting, open relationship with the school. It is only after a trusting relationship has been built that some parents will feel comfortable enough to communicate authentically with teachers and administrators, and such engagement ultimately will lead to increased academic achievement for their children. Teacher preparation programs can contribute greatly by incorporating opportunities for teacher candidates to participate in all school activities that include parents.

Currently, most new teachers learn methods for parent engagement from courses in family and community involvement that are offered as part of the early childhood education or special education programs in colleges of education. This is just not enough; additionally, there is a disconnect between what is taught in teacher education programs and the reality of engaging parents in the school. The actual process of parent engagement can be as diverse as the populations who attend public schools; therefore, there is no “one size fits all” answer.

Parents Can Take the Lead

What can parents and PTA leaders do to improve current parent engagement practices? First, parents and PTAs should make institutions aware of the need for training around parent engagement. Seek to establish a collaborative relationship with your local teacher training institution. This can be done through a formal arrangement with the PTA unit, but it also can be done by individual parents. Work with the institution to begin threading authentic best practices in parent engagement throughout the various courses in the teacher education program. Your child will benefit directly from the effort taken to work with the institution.

Talk with principals, counselors, experienced teachers, and new teachers in your child's school about what works best to encourage parent engagement in your community, as well as what works best for you as a parent. It takes time and energy to help schools and universities understand culture-specific strategies.

Colleges of education, through collaboration with parents and parent groups, should provide parent engagement toolkits for veteran and new teachers alike. Finally, new teachers need to be given an opportunity to practice what they learn about parent engagement across diverse school settings, putting into practice the culturally relevant and appropriate engagement strategies from the parent engagement toolkit.

Parent Learning Communities

Perhaps one of the best new strategies is to work with your principal to establish parent learning communities (PLCs) that meet regularly at your school. PLCs are made up of parents, grandparents, other caregivers and concerned citizens, university liaisons, and the school counselor. Drawing upon the participants' life experiences, trained parent facilitators lead guided conversations to identify and focus on school and community concerns surrounding children and education. PLCs also offer child growth and development information and best practices for parents to implement to help students maximize their school experience socially, emotionally, and academically. The parent development topics are identified and agreed upon by the group prior to the discussion and offer a framework for participants to mentor each other.

Each participant brings particular experience or expertise to the group. Participants with older students are able to draw on their experiences to mentor parents with younger students on how to handle concerns they have already tackled. Participants with younger students can offer fresh and often innovative approaches to older parents, for example, on the benefits and pitfalls of children using social media. The school counselor and university liaisons can bring additional knowledge regarding child development; the liaisons can use information shared by parents and community members to improve teacher preparation programs. This type of learning community increases parenting skills for participants while improving their students' satisfaction with school and overall academic achievement. PLCs give participants a safe space to discuss both positive and negative school and community issues in a respectful manner.

Online PLCs

While most PLCs meet in person, online communities have become a necessity as well as a reality in some areas of the country. Online PLCs allow parents who are unable to attend face-to-face meetings to engage meaningfully in their child's education. PLCs of either kind, but especially online PLCs, can use websites for general information, blog entries that can update users on progress made or new issues that need to be discussed, discussion boards for informal exchanges, and wikis for developing more formal information and tools. Working together creatively can give all parents the opportunity to feel connected and contribute to bettering their child's education.

Parent Engagement Courses

Another strategy PTA leaders and parents can implement is to request that teacher training involve parent engagement as a separate course in the curriculum. Inclusion of parent engagement practices in teacher

education preparation is long overdue. Quality teacher education programs invite parents to speak to preservice and student teachers about their personal experiences around parent engagement at school and seek out PTA and parental input for ongoing course development and improvement. Among the lessons parents and PTAs could contribute to include targeted exercises that require interactions with parents during student teaching and internships, as well as a detailed summary of the day-to-day contributions parents and PTAs make at school. They also can discuss the more global roles parents and PTAs play in advocating for children and education at the local, state, and national levels. Parents can volunteer to participate in university programs where they meet with student teachers to provide the students with additional clinical practice. Role playing and problem solving with student teachers can be informative for both the student teacher and the parent.

We all know that when schools work collaboratively with parents and PTAs, children are set up to have much greater success in school as well as in life. Expanding the circle to include institutions that train teachers can improve the quality of the educational experience of the child, student teacher, and parent. Ten years ago, public schools were charged with promoting partnerships that would increase parent involvement. It is time to take this charge one step further and give a voice to parents and PTAs in the training of teachers throughout the nation. **OC**

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What can parents and PTA leaders do to improve current parent engagement practices?

- Seek to establish a collaborative relationship with a local or nearby teacher training institution.
- Talk with principals, counselors, experienced teachers, and new teachers in your child's school about what works best to encourage parent engagement in your community.
- Encourage schools to allow teachers to practice what they learn about parent engagement across diverse school settings.
- Work with your principal to establish parent learning communities made up of parents, grandparents, caregivers and school staff. A group facilitator can use the participants' life experiences to guide discussion and action.
- Request that teacher training involve parent engagement as a separate course in the curriculum.