

Evaluating a Community-wide Parent/Family Involvement Program

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Abstract

This paper describes the first year evaluation of a community-wide, parent/family involvement program initiated in a midsized, Southeast community and school district. The program consists of three major components: (1) Community-Wide Efforts, (2) School-Home Communication, and (3) Home Involvement. Formative and summative evaluation data were gathered through survey forms, telephone interviews, and focus groups involving parents, school administrators, teachers and students. Results show that Community-Wide Efforts were favorably regarded by participants but led to relatively few changes in parents' levels of involvement. School administrators and teachers viewed most aspects of School-Home Communication more positively and more effective than did parents. All stakeholders considered Home Involvement important, but discrepancies were evident among teachers, parents, and students' responses. Recommendations for improving parent involvement programs are discussed.

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Extensive research conducted over several decades verifies a strong and consistent relationship between parents' involvement in education-related activities and their children's educational attainment (Gordon 1979; Benson, Buckley, & Medrich, 1980; Leler 1987, Stevenson & Baker 1987, Dauber & Epstein 1993, Epstein 1991, Henderson & Berla 1994). Whether construed as school-based activities (e.g., attending school events), teacher-parent communication (e.g., talking with parents about students' problems and/or successes in school), or home-based behaviors (e.g., helping with homework), parent involvement has been positively linked to indicators of student achievement, including teacher ratings of student competence, student grades, and test or assessment results (Deslandes, Royer, Potvin, & Leclerc, 1999; Epstein & Van Voorhis, 2001; Fan & Chen, 1999; Hill & Craft, 2003; Miedel & Reynolds, 1999; Okagaki & Frensch, 1998; Shaver & Walls, 1998).

Programs designed to encourage greater levels of parent involvement vary widely, however, and include a diverse array of components. Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler (1995) suggest that the most effective programs view parent involvement as a "process" developed over time and including multiple stakeholders. Programs that involve parents, children, educators, and the larger community in an overall, collaborative network frequently improve students' school achievement and their sense of self-efficacy. Such process-oriented programs appear especially beneficial with minority children and those who come from economically disadvantaged homes (Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler 1995; Hoover-Dempsey, Walker, Sandler, Whetsel, Green, Wilkins, & Closson, 2005).

Other researchers suggest that successful programs employ “nontraditional strategies” designed to appeal to diverse groups of educators, parents, and children (Floyd 1998, Hale-Benson 1982). Furthermore, parent involvement strategies must include a wide range of activities in order to accommodate parents’ busy work and home schedules (Dauber & Epstein, 1993). Epstein (1989), for example, offers five different types of parent involvement activities that can be adapted to maximize parent participation and reach the largest number of parents. Iglesias (1996) further notes that participation opportunities need to be “tailored to match family needs and styles” because families are more likely to “implement those professional recommendations that match their values and beliefs” (p. 163).

Context of the Study

The Parent/Family Involvement Program on which this evaluation focused includes a variety of “nontraditional strategies” in order to encourage higher levels of involvement among diverse groups of parents and families in school related activities. The program, funded largely through a private foundation, is implemented in a midsized, Southeast community and school district that enrolls approximately 34,000 students. The program focuses on students and families from eight of the 32 elementary schools in the district. These schools all enroll high percentages (more than 50%) of students from economically disadvantaged homes. The schools range in size from 260 students to 579 students, and together enroll a total of 3167 students.

The program currently includes three major components:

1. **Community-Wide Efforts** that involve a large Parent/Family Conference and Back-to-School Rally, held on a Saturday in August, just before the beginning of the school year. All parents

from the targeted schools receive personal invitations to the Rally and are provided free transportation to and from the event. The Conference and Rally include a general session for all parents and guardians, a series of small group sessions on different topics, an Academic Challenge competition for students, and displays set up by various community agencies and organizations (health services, public library, etc.). Program funds are used to provide transportation for parents and their children, to offer childcare services during the sessions, and to purchase school supplies for all families that attend.

2. School-Home Communication Strategies that involve special professional development sessions for teachers, administrators, and staff members of the eight target schools. These training sessions and follow-up activities focus on helping educators to enhance communication opportunities between schools and homes. They also include specific strategies for making schools more welcoming to parents and helping teachers engage more parents in a variety of school-related activities.

3. Home Involvement Strategies that help parents and family members become more aware of useful activities at home that support and encourage success in learning and value school academic achievement.

The goal of each component is to encourage increased involvement on the part of economically disadvantaged parents and families in the education of their children. The purpose of the evaluation is to determine the success of each program component in achieving that goal and to provide formative information to help program developers improve the effectiveness of

each component. The program's premise is that this increased involvement ultimately will lead to higher levels of student achievement and greater school success.

Data Sources

Although program components are clearly related and relationships across the components were considered vital to the program, data were gathered for each program component separately. In addition, because the program is part of an ongoing, sustained effort to improve parent and family involvement, much of the data gathered were considered baseline indicators from which specific improvements will later be judged.

For the **Community-Wide Efforts**, all parents and guardians attending the Parent/Family Conference and Back-to-School Rally were asked to complete a one-page, *Parent Evaluation Form*, based on the particular Conference session or sessions attended. This form consists mostly of rating-scale items that ask parents and guardians to judge the quality of each session and other aspects of the Conference and Rally. Furthermore, participating parents and guardians were asked what they found to be most valuable at the Conference and Rally, and what they learned. Open-ended items were used to gather information about parents' and guardians' general impressions and to solicit their suggestions for improvement.

In addition, a random sample of parents and guardians of children attending the eight targeted schools who received invitations to the Conference and Rally but did not attend was selected to participate in a *Telephone Survey*. Calls were made approximately one month after the Conference and Rally were held. Parents were told the purpose of the interview and asked if they would participate. All parents were assured that they were free to decline or to stop the interview at any time. Parents also were guaranteed that all information was confidential.

During the survey, parents or guardians were asked why they did not attend and what steps might be taken in the future to encourage their attendance. Interviewers made calls at varying times of the day during weekdays and on weekends.

All surveys were conducted in English, except at one school where approximately 50% of parents speak Spanish as their first language. For this school, a bilingual interviewer made the calls to ensure that the survey questions would be understood by both English and Spanish-speaking parents.

The evaluation of **School-Home Communication Strategies** included four sources of data. The first involved a *School Records and Procedures Survey* completed by the principals from the eight targeted schools. This survey inquired about the schools and the teachers' efforts to share information about students' learning progress with parents and guardians. It was developed and pilot tested specifically for the evaluation. Pilot testing involved reviews by two scholars in educational administration and trial administrations to two, non-involved elementary school principals. The survey included items that asked about report cards and forms, notes with report cards, assessment reports, regular progress reports, newsletters, phone calls, personal letters, email messages, access to school web-pages, open-house meetings, homework assignments, evaluated projects or assignments, portfolios of students' work, homework hotlines, parent-teacher conferences or student-led conferences, and other sources of evidence on student learning. Survey items asked whether or not a particular aspect of communication was used. If used, principals were asked to offer a brief description that communication tool and to indicate its frequency of use.

Second, all teachers from the eight targeted schools were asked to complete a *Teacher Survey* that included questions about their efforts to communicate directly with parents and

guardians, the nature of those communication efforts, and the results. Like the *School Records and Procedures Survey*, this survey was developed and pilot tested specifically for the evaluation. Items closely parallel those in the *School Records and Procedures Survey* completed by the principals, but also included open-ended responses for teachers to describe their own, individual communication procedures.

Third, all parents and guardians of children enrolled in the eight targeted schools were asked to complete a slightly modified form of the *Family Involvement Questionnaire* (Fantuzzo, Tighe, & Childs, 2000). This questionnaire was sent home from each school with students, along with a letter to parents describing the nature of the program and requesting their participation. A Spanish version of the letter and *Questionnaire* was provided for parents and guardians whose first language is Spanish. Items on the *Questionnaire* inquired about parents' communication and interactions with school officials and especially their child's teacher, the nature of those communications, and the results.

Finally, a sample of parents from each of the eight targeted schools was selected to participate in a series of *Focus Group Meetings*. Discussions during these focus group meetings centered on current school-home communication efforts, perceived barriers to that communication, and what could be done to overcome barriers and improve communication efforts between educators and parents.

The involvement of parents and families at home with children's education activities represents another vital dimension of the program. Information on these **Home Involvement Strategies** was gathered in two ways. First, all parents or guardians with children enrolled in the eight targeted schools were asked to complete a modified form of the *Family Involvement Questionnaire* (Fantuzzo, Tighe, & Childs, 2000). This is the same form described above. In

this form, however, items were modified to inquire about parents' interactions with their child at home regarding educational issues generally, and the child's learning progress in school specifically.

Second, all fourth and fifth grade students in each of the eight targeted schools completed a modified form of the *Family Involvement Questionnaire* that included questions about their interactions with their parents or guardians at home regarding educational issues, school activities, and their learning progress in school. Fourth and fifth grade students were selected because of their more advanced reading levels and, hence, better understanding of the *Questionnaire* items.

Results

Community-Wide Efforts

Parent Evaluation Forms. The Conference and Rally attendance was much smaller than anticipated. A total of only 79 *Parent Evaluation Forms* were completed by parents and guardians who attended 14 different sessions at the Conference and Rally. Those who attended gave generally positive ratings to the general session and to the small group sessions. They also reported that all sessions offered useful information. When asked whether or not a particular session offered specific suggestions for becoming more involved in their child's education, however, parents' responses varied widely. Some sessions appeared to offer many specific ideas while others offered few or none.

When asked about other session topics that would be of interest, parents and guardians made relatively few recommendations. The five most frequently mentioned topics included:

1. How site-based councils work for parents

2. How to relay parents' concerns to site-based councils
3. Skills for me in helping my child with homework
4. How to stop bullying in my child's school
5. Information on new and future programs.

Telephone Survey. A total of 75 parents or guardians who did not attend the Conference and Rally were contacted and asked to participate in the *Telephone Survey*. From among these, 48 parents (64%) agreed to participate, while 24 parents (32%) declined due to time constraints or because they had no interest. Three parents (4%) declined because the child registered at their address did not live in their home.

The relationship between the student and the adult who took part in the survey ranged from mothers and fathers to great grandmothers. Even though several different relatives participated, mothers, fathers, and grandmothers composed the majority of respondents. Overall, 48% of respondents were mothers, 15% were fathers, and 25% were grandmothers.

Respondents were asked how they received information about the Conference and Rally and whether or not it was an effective way. About half (44%) indicated that they received information about the Rally through the mail and most thought that this was an appropriate means of communication. Only a small number (10%) indicated that they received information from their child's school in addition to the mailed information forms. While notices were sent to all parents and guardians both through the mail and home with children from school, this discrepancy suggests that few forms sent home with children from school reached parents or guardians, and mailing was more effective. Nevertheless, 44% of those responding indicated

that they received no prior information about the Conference and Rally, either through the mail or from their child's school.

Gender and language differences between parents who reported receiving information and those who did not also were evident. All but one father who participated in the survey responded that they had not received information about the Conference and Rally, whereas the majority of mothers and grandmothers replied that they had. In addition, all Spanish-speaking parents from the one school indicated that they did not receive information about the Conference and Rally, while all English-speaking parents at the same school reported receiving information. One Spanish-speaking parent articulated that she may have received something in the mail, but because it was not in Spanish, she could not read it.

The three most common reasons parents or guardians who received information about the Conference and Rally gave for not attending included work conflicts (27%), previous time conflicts (27%), and not being interested in the event (15%). Those who cited work conflicts indicated that these conflicts probably could not be changed and would hamper attendance in future events. This reflects the findings of other research that shows that inflexibility with regard to event time and location prohibit many parents' participation (Manner, 2006).

Some of the parents and guardians who noted previous time conflicts elaborated that the conflict was an irregular activity like visiting family or other activities that could not be accounted for by program planners. Other parents indicated, however, that their time conflict resulted simply from busy family schedules. Several parents and guardians who cited lack of interest did not want to attend the Conference and Rally, primarily because the day was too long or they were not interested in the proceedings.

It also should be noted that 15% of parents or guardians who received information about the Conference and Rally did not respond to the question about why they did not attend. An additional 12% of parents or guardians also indicated that they simply forgot about the event. Those who indicated that they forgot were asked about helpful ways they might be reminded of the Conference and Rally in the future. Most said that they did not believe postcards or phone calls would be helpful reminders.

When asked about what time is best for them to attend events such as the Conference and Rally, 19% of parents and guardians specified weekends, while an equal number (19%) indicated evenings. Weekdays were considered best by 15% of responding parents. The largest number of parents and guardians (25%), however, had no response to this inquiry while others (17%) indicated that time or work conflicts would limit their attendance regardless of when the event was scheduled. Overall, parents' and guardians' suggestions for the best time varied widely, and there appeared to be no relation between their suggestions and the reasons offered for not attending.

Parents and guardians were asked if they had suggestions about how to improve the Conference and Rally so that more families could be involved. The overwhelming majority of those responding (87%) gave no suggestions for improving the Conference and Rally. A select few (13%), however, made suggestions about what they would like to experience at such events. Their recommendations included: (1) Give information about after school programs that offer services for children who function below and above grade level; (2) Provide information about what children should be learning at different grade levels; (3) Offer fun, educational games that help children see that learning is fun and that would keep children entertained while parents

received information; (4) Make the day shorter; and (5) Schedule the event earlier in the summer (not so close to the beginning of school).

In addition to information pertaining to the Conference and Rally, parents and guardians also were queried about school-to-home communication. Nearly all responding parents (98%) claimed to be comfortable at their child's school. They stated that they felt at ease going to the school, and also in talking with their child's teacher and/or principal. Moreover, 71% of parents recalled conferences at the school that they attended during the past school year. Approximately 25% of parents reported not attending parent/teacher conferences, however. These parents did not indicate whether this resulted from the school's lack of scheduling or whether they simply choose not to attend.

Parents who did attend conferences explained that during these meetings they discussed with the teacher report cards, progress reports, school work and other general information about their child and his or her school. Furthermore, the majority of parents (58%) reported receiving calls from their child's teacher regarding positive behavior or good work. A much smaller number (15%) said that they received good news about their child's behavior or school work through notes from the teacher. However, 21% of parents indicated that they had not received any positive information from the teacher or the school regarding their child's behavior or work in school. A small number of parents (4%) did not respond to this question.

When asked if and how often they helped their children with homework, the overwhelming majority of parents and guardians (90%), stressed that they did help with homework, ranging from everyday to whenever their help was needed. While perceiving themselves as active in terms of their child's homework, parents were more divided when it came to being active at their child's school. Only 46% of parents, for example, indicated that

they were involved in activities at their child's school such as providing items for a party, attending PTA meetings, volunteering in their child's classroom, or accompanying their child's class on fieldtrips. A comparable number of parents (44%) admitted that they were not involved in any activities at their child's school.

Finally, parents were asked whether they had any additional information to share with the interviewer about their child's school. Although most parents had nothing to add, some used this as an opportunity to express their general sense of satisfaction or dissatisfaction with their child's school.

School-Home Communication Strategies

School Records and Procedures Survey. The principals from all eight targeted schools completed and returned the *School Records and Procedures Survey*. Responses were recorded, coded, and summarized in search of general trends. Analyses showed, however, that responses varied greatly from school to school, and only a few general trends were evident. In most cases the school principals were relatively new administrators and had been at their schools for only a short time. Six of the principals of the eight targeted schools have five years or less experience in school administration, and four of the eight are in their first year as the school principal. In this district, elementary schools with the greatest concentration of children from economically disadvantaged backgrounds clearly had the least experienced school leaders.

When asked about the report card currently being used in their school, most principals indicated that both they and the teachers are only somewhat satisfied with the current form. Most emphasized that the report card is explicit and easy for teachers to use, but several believe it does not include important information that parents want and need. Nevertheless, most

principals believed that parents are generally satisfied with the current report card and, hence, see no need for immediate change.

Responses to assessment reports from state assessments or nationally-normed, standardized assessments were quite similar to that of report cards. Principals reported that they and their teachers are only somewhat satisfied. Several indicated that parents often misinterpret the results from these reports or have difficulty understanding just what the information means. All principals reported that regular newsletters describing school activities and events are sent home with students to parents and guardians. Most of the schools prepare monthly newsletters, but two schools report using weekly newsletters.

Responses to questions about phone calls showed the greatest variance. Two principals indicated they made five or less phone calls per week to parents, while two others said they made twenty or more phone calls per week. Most of these calls were follow-ups to parents' questions or concerns, or to inform parents about particular academic or behavioral difficulties their child was experiencing. Two principals reported calling parents to share good news as well. Most principals believe that their teachers make five to ten phone calls per week to parents, although one principal reported teachers making over 20 phone calls per week. Most of these calls are to inform parents about specific academic or behavioral problems, and to solicit their help in addressing the problems. Some calls are made to tell parents about upcoming school events, particularly parent-teacher conferences.

None of the principals reported having a school webpage or homework hotline for parents to access to gain information about the school or their child's class. Many principals noted that the majority of their parents and guardians do not have home computers that would allow such access, even if it was available.

While all of the schools sponsor open house meetings, participation rates vary greatly. One principal indicated that only 10% to 20% of parents attend, while another reported nearly 100% attendance. Most principals reported participation rates of 50% to 60%. Parents typically are informed of open house meetings through newsletters, notes distributed to students to take home, and announcements on the school marquis.

All of the schools also hold two parent-teacher conferences during the school year and, similar to open house meetings, participation rates vary among the schools. Three principals stated that less than half of the parents or guardians take part, while three other principals reported 90% or more participation. Parents and guardians are informed of the conferences in newsletters, notes distributed to students, phone calls, and on the school marquis. At the present time, none of the schools use student-led conferences. Several principals indicated that they are currently exploring different means of encouraging higher levels of participation, but no specific recommendations for improvement were noted.

Teacher Survey. Responses to the *Teacher Survey* also varied widely. Among the 314 teachers from the eight targeted schools included in the program, 147 (47%) completed the *Survey*. Response rates varied widely among the schools, ranging from 90% to only 26%. At only three schools did more than half of the teachers complete and return the *Survey*.

Of the 147 teachers who completed the *Teacher Survey*, 118 (80%) offered complete responses that could be tallied for the analysis. Item responses were coded and then converted to a percentage to make comparisons across measures easier. School scores represented the average score for the teachers from that school. These potentially could range from 0 to 100, with higher scores representing greater effort to communicate with parents and guardians.

The average rating across all schools was 83.5. This indicates that teachers generally believe they are making considerable effort to communicate with parents and guardians, and to involve them in school activities. Differences among schools were relatively modest, ranging from a high of 89.7 to a low of 72.8. Differences among the teachers within each school, however, were quite large. The overall within school standard deviation in ratings was 18.1, indicating a range among teachers' ratings within each school from nearly 100 to less than 50. This shows that substantial differences exist among the teachers in each school in their efforts to communicate with parents and guardians. While some teachers communicate on a regular basis and report high levels of success in their efforts, other teachers in the same school appear to invest little time or energy in such efforts. Communication between teachers and parents or guardians therefore appears to be based more on the initiative of individual teachers rather than on school-wide policies or procedures.

Family Involvement Survey. A total of 803 *Family Involvement Surveys* were returned from parents or guardians of children enrolled in the eight targeted schools. Based on an estimate of approximately 3000 households, this represents an overall response rate of only 26%. Response rates varied greatly among the schools, ranging from 46% to only 12%. Only two of the schools had a response rate of 40% or greater. Due to these relatively low response rates, and the fact that the parents and guardians who responded are likely to be more involved in their child's education than non-responders, these results must be interpreted with caution.

Similar to the *Teacher Survey*, item responses on the *Family Involvement Survey* were coded and then converted to a percentage to make comparisons across measures easier. School scores represent the average score for the parents and guardians who responded to the *Survey*

from that school. These potentially could range from 0 to 100, with higher scores representing greater levels of involvement.

The average *Survey* scores among the eight targeted schools were fairly comparable. They ranged from a high of 76.6 to a low of about 64.9. Score variation within each school was also comparable, but quite large (overall within school standard deviation = 16.2). This indicates that parents from each school differed greatly in their responses to the questions in the *Survey*. Some parents expressed high levels of involvement while other parents from the same school expressed relatively low levels. This variation is surprising, since it seems likely that the parents and guardians who responded to the *Survey* generally would be more involved in their children's education. Nevertheless, consideration of this variation among the parents and guardians from each school will be a vitally important in improvement efforts.

Comparisons of the highest and lowest rated items also showed consistency across schools. The three most highly rated items were: 5. *I spend time working with my child on reading/writing skills.* 17. *I see that my child has a place for books and school materials.* and 26. *I review my child's school work.* The three lowest rated items include: 4. *I go on class trips with my child.* 10. *I participate in planning school trips for my child.* 13. *I meet with other parents from my child's class outside of school.* These results show that among the parents and guardians who completed the *Survey*, most try to provide learning assistance to their children at home and try to review their child's school work. At the same time, most responding parents and guardians also indicate that they do not participate in school functions such as class trips or parent meetings.

Focus Groups. At each of the eight targeted schools, principals were asked to identify a small group of parents and guardians to participate in a 90-minute *Focus Group* session with a facilitator. Given that principals were likely to identify parents or guardians who were known to the principal, probably through their involvement in school activities, this selection procedure undoubtedly biased the results. However, a random selection process attempted at one school proved quite disappointing, with less than 20% of the selected parents agreeing to take part.

During the *Focus Group* sessions, selected parents and guardians were asked a variety of questions dealing with school-home communication, home environments, parent involvement, parent expectations, and experiences. Each group was given “Focus Group Guidelines” by the facilitator and prompted with a standard set of questions. Parents and guardians were encouraged to be open and honest. They also were informed that all information gathered during these discussions would be confidential.

Most participating parents and guardians indicated that they volunteered at their child’s school regularly and were involved in an array of activities such as PTA meetings, school suppers, field trips, and volunteering in the classroom. Some parents and guardians said, however, that they visited their child’s school only for school-wide meetings and other special events.

Parents differed in their responses regarding how they received information about volunteer opportunities. Several schools had well organized communication techniques where parents and guardians were informed through letters, newsletters, phone calls, and face-to-face contact, while other schools did not disseminate information in a consistent or particularly timely fashion.

The majority of parents and guardians felt comfortable visiting their child's school and talking with teachers and principals. They also indicated, however, that some teachers and school personnel responded better to parents and appreciated their involvement more than others. It was also evident in these discussions that teachers', principals', and other school officials' accessibility and responsiveness varied within and between schools. Parents at some schools felt comfortable visiting their child's school while parents at other schools felt uneasy and frustrated.

Parent-teacher conferences were one area where parents and guardians felt that teachers communicated effectively. Although parents felt parent-teacher conferences were usually rushed, they responded positively about their relationships with school professionals within these meetings and indicated that they received helpful information.

All parents and guardians indicated that they helped their child with his or her homework. Their responses varied, however, when asked about the strategies they employed when their child's homework was difficult for them. Some parents sent unfinished homework back to the teacher, others looked for outside sources of help, and still others asked the teacher for help. Several parents voiced concern and discomfort when they could not help their children with difficult homework, especially Spanish-speaking parents.

Overall, parents saw their involvement in their children's education both at school and at home as important and necessary. Parents understood that being involved in their children's school included such things as having a good relationship with their children's teachers, being present at the school on a regular basis, helping with homework, making sure children are ready to learn once they arrive at school, volunteering and being available to help. Parents asserted that the goal of being involved was to make sure their child knew they cared about them and

their education. Parents understood that participating in their child's education built their child's confidence, accountability, and interest in school.

Although parents and guardians generally understood the importance of parental involvement and tried to be present at the school, they also mentioned numerous constraints that hindered their participation. Some of these included: work, childcare, ineffective school communication, transportation, and other family obligations. Parents also noted that many activities in which they would like to participate were scheduled at inopportune times, again reflecting the constraint noted in the research of inflexible times and locations (Manner, 2006).

Parents and guardians found multiple ways to be involved in their child's education according to their schedules. Most, however, devalued their own skills, contributions, and resources. While a few parents and guardians indicated they could help their child's school with clerical work, computers, or event planning, most did not state personal talents or skills. Rather, they suggested that they would help where teachers and school officials deemed most appropriate. As a result, parents and guardians filled the traditional volunteer roles prescribed by school officials.

Although most focus groups included one parent or guardian who participated in the school's Site-Based Decision Making Council (SBDM), the overwhelming majority of parents asserted that they were not included in school-wide decisions. Several stated that even when parents attended school decision making meetings, they felt intimidated to question the principal or the teachers.

Parents and guardians articulated several areas during the focus group sessions that they believed could improve parent involvement. The majority of parents and guardians wanted computer, technology, math, and reading classes for parents so that they could learn the material

their children received at school. Parents felt that these classes would not only help parents know what their children are learning, but it also would help them to assist their children better. Parents also wanted workshops and classes on child development and parenting skills. In addition, parents wanted more effective communication from both teachers and school administrators, and childcare during school activities. Spanish-speaking parents wanted ESL classes and some English-speaking parents wanted Spanish classes.

Home Involvement Strategies

Student Survey. A total of 269 students from the eight targeted schools completed the *Student Survey*. The *Surveys* were distributed only to the fourth and fifth grade students in each school, so this represents an overall response rate of approximately 30%. Response rates varied greatly among schools, ranging from a high of 72% to a low of 19%. Two schools returned no *Student Surveys*. This relatively low overall response rate, combined with the widely varied response rates among the schools, means that the results from the *Student Survey* also must be interpreted with caution.

Similar to the *Teacher Survey* and the *Family Involvement Survey*, item responses on the *Student Survey* were coded and then converted to a percentage to make comparisons across measures easier. School scores represent the average score for the 4th and 5th grade students who completed the *Survey* from that school. These potentially could range from 0 to 100, with higher scores representing greater levels of reported parent involvement.

The average *Survey* scores among the eight schools were fairly comparable. They ranged from a high of about 71.2 to a low of about 61.9. The average score for all schools was 64.2. Score variation within each school was also comparable, but quite large (overall within school

standard deviation = 18.9). This indicates that students from each school varied widely in their responses to the questions in the *Survey*. Some students expressed relatively high levels of parental involvement while other students from the same school expressed relatively low levels.

While some variation existed among the schools in terms of the highest and lowest rated items, results were fairly consistent. Across schools, the three most highly rated items overall were: 8. *I tell my parent about any difficulties I have at school.* 12. *I talk with my parents about my successes in school.* and 18. *My parent attends conferences with my teacher to talk about my learning.* The three lowest rated items overall included: 1. *My parent volunteers in my school.* 4. *My parent goes on class trips with me.* and 9. *My parent brings home learning materials for me.* These results closely parallel parents' responses on the *Family Involvement Survey*. They show that students who completed the *Survey* generally talk with their parents about both their successes and difficulties in school, but that their parents tend not to participate in school functions such as class trips or parent meetings.

Comparing Results from *School, Teacher, Family, and Student Surveys*

Comparing the results from the *Teacher, Family, and Student Surveys* provided several interesting insights. Because these surveys could not be directly matched due to confidentiality restrictions; that is, a specific student's response could not be matched with that of his or her parent or guardian, or his or her teacher; comparisons based on pooled, within-school scores were all that was possible.

Across the eight target schools, teachers reported significantly higher levels of involvement than did parents. In other words, teachers believe they do much more to encourage parent/family involvement in children's education than parents and guardians believe they do.

Similarly, parents and guardians reported significantly higher levels of involvement than did students. This implies that parents and guardians believe they are much more involved in their children's education than their children perceive them to be. In some cases, these differences are dramatic. For example, teachers' and parents' perceptions at one school differed by 18 points; parents' and students' perceptions at another school differed by more than 14 points.

These differences may be the result of the mismatch between the teachers, parents, and students who completed the surveys. Although all teachers were asked to complete the *Teacher Survey* and all parents and guardians were asked to complete the *Family Survey*, response rates were only 47% and 26% respectively. The *Student Survey* was completed by only 30% of students, and these were only the fourth and fifth grade students at each school. Still, it seems reasonable to assume that whatever response bias may be present, it would be equally represented in each of these groups. Therefore, these differences may well reflect true disparities in the perceptions of involvement among teachers, parents, and students.

Analyses of the *School Records and Procedures Survey* data show that school administrators view most aspects of school-home communication as much more positive and much more effective than do teachers. Teachers, in turn, view school-home communication as more positive and more effective than do parents. In both questionnaire data and in responses to questions during the focus groups, parents revealed that they would like more information from educators about their children's achievement and behavior in school. Parents also indicated that they would like that information on a more regular basis and in a form that they can easily understand. Many parents indicated that they had difficulty interpreting report cards, progress reports, and test results. Other parents stressed the need to have more specific suggestions from educators, and especially their children's teachers, about how they can help at home. On the

other hand, apparently parents believe they are more involved in their children's education than their children perceive them to be. It also may be, of course, that parents are simply more sensitive to the issues at stake and provided what they believed to be the more acceptable responses.

Summary and Conclusions

The purpose of this evaluation was to provide a clear picture of a particular Parent/Family Involvement Program, both to determine current levels of effectiveness and to identify specific areas for improvement. It was intended to provide program developers with precise information from which they can direct program revisions and modifications. It also was intended to offer accurate baseline data from which the program's ultimate effectiveness can be determined. Therefore, judgments of the program's overall value or worth based on the information available at this time would be inappropriate. Nevertheless, three implications seem clear from these results.

First, consistent trends in the research evidence verify the need for improvement efforts in parent/family involvement to address multiple levels, including the community, the school, the classroom, and the home. This makes clear the wisdom of the developers of this program to ensure a multi-faceted approach to parent/family involvement. Such a comprehensive design will be essential in meeting the program's goals. Effectively integrating the various components of such a multi-faceted approach so that they operate in harmony, however, remains a significant challenge. Discrepancies in the perceptions of school principals, teachers, parents, and students shows the need for better policies to encourage parent and family involvement, and for more helpful forms of communication among these different groups.

Second, research evidence also points to the powerful influence of educators in encouraging appropriate and effective forms of parent/family involvement. Clearly schools and the educators who work within them cannot be expected to respond effectively to all of the circumstances that limit the involvement of parents and families in the education children, especially those who come from economically disadvantaged households. Nevertheless, educators do have considerable power to respond to many of these circumstances. Studies show, for example, that when teachers offer recommendations about parental help with learning in specific areas, parents' beliefs about the importance of their help and their involvement behaviors in those areas increase (e.g., see Epstein, 2005; Hoover-Dempsey, et al., 2005). This adds further support to the program's emphasis on the efforts of school leaders and teachers to improve and sustain parent/family involvement.

Third, the wide variation in the evidence gathered from teachers, parents, and students indicates that while parent/family involvement is a problem for many, it is not for all. Some teachers and some parents seem to have found highly effective ways of becoming involved and sustaining involvement in children's education. Therefore, program developers and school leaders may not have to look far to find approaches that are appropriate and highly effective in these particular contexts. Within each school, models of excellence in encouraging involvement may already exist and that could serve to guide the development of new policies and programs.

It is also evident, however, that the majority of teachers and parents need specific guidance and assistance in their efforts to improve parent/family involvement. While this program represents an excellent beginning, a lot of challenging work lies ahead. Professional development designed to help school leaders and teachers learn about the elements under their

control that contribute most effectively to parent/family involvement, and how they can best take advantage of those elements, will be imperative.

Parent involvement remains a vital dimension to students' academic success. Efforts designed to improve both the quantity and quality of parent involvement will continue to be an important component of school improvement programs and of strategies designed to reduce the achievement gap between economically disadvantaged students and their more advantaged counterparts. Evaluation results stemming from multi-faceted programs such as this provide important evidence for enhancing those efforts and building better and more effective parent involvement programs.

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