

# Promising Website Practices for Disseminating Research on Family-School Partnerships to the Community

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## Abstract

The issue of research dissemination via websites is part of the larger research utilization question, and the authors begin with a review of literature on the theory and best practices in dissemination. The second part of the study involves an exploratory examination of the websites and dissemination practices of 30 research centers focusing on the field of family-school partnership issues. Using the literature review as a guide to look at the websites, the researchers rate each website and compile a listing of promising practices. Although the results are exploratory, they do pose important questions about audience and about including all stakeholders in the research-dissemination process. The results also provide some practical suggestions about websites for both researchers and for family-school partnership programs.

Key Words: family-school partnerships, dissemination, research, websites

## Introduction

There is a question that researchers in the field of family-school partnerships do not like to discuss: Does the community ever find out about their research? Researchers spend thousands of dollars and hundreds of hours getting doctoral degrees, applying for research grants, conducting research, giving presentations to colleagues, writing journal articles, and publishing books, but

does any of this research ever reach the intended audience – family-school partnership practitioners? How is family-school partnership research disseminated to the community? Is the community hearing about any of the research findings? Will the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) requirement to use more evidence-based practices entice family-school partnership practitioners to want to hear about research? Do family-school partnerships care about research findings? What are best practices for getting research on family-school partnerships to the public?

Examining the question of the dissemination of family-school partnership research is a complex issue that is part of the much larger issue of research utilization. These researchers explored one small part of the larger, multi-faceted research utilization question – the issue of research dissemination strategies in family-school partnership websites. This purposive study had two parts – a review of the literature on the theory and best practices in dissemination and an exploratory examination of the websites of 30 research centers – focusing on the field of family-school partnership issues and dissemination practices.

The purpose of the literature review was to develop a foundation about current theories and practice recommendations. The plan was to use these recommendations as a “yardstick” to look at the dissemination practices of websites in the field of family-school partnerships. The researchers wanted to know if the websites of these research centers are employing strategies that help family members, school personnel, and community members to find out about and ultimately use the latest research. This question is also important for the practice community who increasingly head to websites as a first strategy when looking for empirical studies to support their requests for new family-school partnership programs or who want to find an evidence-based program or practice to implement according to NCLB requirements. Family-school partnership programs also have a vested interest in the topic (dissemination and websites) since they use websites to disseminate program activities and content to community and school partners.

Many recent authors (e.g., Bachrach et al., 1998; Dzewaltowski et al., 2004; Smart, 2005; Woolis & Restler, 2003) see the Internet as a low-cost, easily available dissemination channel, and most research centers maintain an active website. Even though not all organizations allow their staff to have access to the Internet and not all have the same amount of information technology, the Internet is one of the most widely used forms of research dissemination, and its use in the dissemination process is growing.

In the examination of the family-school partnership websites, the researchers were assessing whether the centers were using Havelock's 1969 model, which described research utilization as a one-way, linear process of research–

development–dissemination–evaluation, or if they were using Hutchinson and Huberman’s 1993 model, which re-characterized research utilization as an active learning process whereby the knowledge is mediated in the practice arena and the user acts on the knowledge being presented and imposes meaning and organization on the disseminated information. The goal of the literature review and exploratory examination of websites was to develop a set of preliminary questions for future research, build stronger bridges between research and community, and provide some practical suggestions for both researchers and for family-school partnership programs.

## Background

Most studies of the research utilization process (e.g., Weiss, 1988; Chavkin, 1993) lament the huge gap between research and practice utilization. Early theories about research utilization (Havelock, 1969) saw the user as a receiver with a “blank slate,” “sponge,” or “empty bucket” that would receive the information from research articles and use the findings of the research studies exactly as they were received. Rogers (1988) calls this the traditional agricultural extension model where the primary focus is on spreading the word.

Later, with the era of advanced technology, these theories were modified to see the user comparable to a computer that processes and filters information in an orderly manner and then uses the sorted information at the appropriate times. Shapiro (1994) suggests that even though these rather simplistic models of distributing the information, sorting the information, and then using the information are now held in low regard when discussing theories about dissemination and research utilization, the models are still widely observed and may be the most predominant practice models in existence and lend credence to the general complaint that there is a missing link in the dissemination of research to the public.

Using constructivist learning theory, Hutchinson and Huberman (1993) changed our understanding of theories of dissemination and research utilization. Their work altered the view of knowledge as an inert object to the view of knowledge as a fluid process of understandings that was shaped by both the developers and the users. The user was not just the receiver of knowledge but also was an active constructor. This model was a radical departure from earlier conceptions of dissemination and research utilization; it suggested that new knowledge was actually being formed as users were shaping and adapting the knowledge that they were receiving.

The new utilization model also suggests that users are most likely to use and adapt the research when they perceive that they have a need for the information.

Marketers have particularly embraced this theory by focusing on users' perceptions of need; thus marketers work hard to convince us that we "need" to use the latest product. Herie and Martin (2002) suggest that social marketing theory has strong relevance to knowledge diffusion in translating research findings to the community, and they give examples of the effective dissemination of research-based addiction treatment modalities to direct practice clinicians. Their work is in line with the idea that social marketing provides the framework for practice innovation (Fine & Fine, 1986; Kledaras, 1985; Kotler & Zaltman, 1971). Thus, the issue of dissemination moves to the forefront of the research utilization cycle.

Zervigon-Hakes (1995) analyzes the many problems of translating research findings by examining the roles, communication styles, communication media, range of research interests, and timing of researchers and then comparing those characteristics with the roles, communication styles, communication media, range of research interests, and timing of elected public officials, appointed policymakers, and career policymakers. She aptly points out that researchers and policymakers operate very differently. For example, researchers tend to publish in technical journals, technical books, and governmental program reports, but policymakers tend to get their information from newspapers, televisions, and issue briefs. In addition to the major differences in communication media, there were also differences in style, range of research interests, and timing. Researchers used technical language, and public officials and policymakers were more people-oriented and worked to communicate with a variety of literacy levels. Public officials had broad ranges of interest and wanted quick responses; researchers worked in more discipline-specific modes and needed time to conduct quality research.

Barratt (1998) concurs with Zervigon-Hakes (1995) about the lack of communication between researchers and practitioners. She reports that researchers do not always make results understandable to practitioners, and practitioners are not often exposed to research. Even when research does reach practitioners, the research might not work in the new setting because of oversimplification during the dissemination process or implementation issues. The difference in values and attitudes between researchers and practitioners is a big stumbling block to the utilization of research. Barratt's study gathered information from staff of child welfare agencies on putting research in practice. The results showed that everyone involved agreed that research results should be put into a clear format for practitioners to understand, and agencies should have access to evidence-based research in libraries within the agency. Managers agreed that staff need time in the agency to read research and understand it in order to use more evidence-based practices in their own practice; however, they noted

that there is not sufficient time for this due to the lack of staff. Barratt also recommends using teams in agencies as a way to better utilize evidence-based practice. The idea is that teams would generate more discussion of research ideas since more than one person would have the research findings, and then the team discussions might lead to more effective application of research.

Involving practitioners in all stages of research, including hypothesis conception, data collection, data analysis, and dissemination is an age-old idea but not one that is frequently practiced. Hargreaves (1999) and Finifter and colleagues (2005) suggest that dissemination is most effective when researchers and practitioners are working together from start to finish. The more communication between the two parties, the more successful the future transactions are between them. Many times it is the researchers who have problems with disseminating information because they do not understand the context of the data they have collected. If the data are from schools, researchers need teachers to help translate it into practice. The authors suggest that universities should work together with teachers and practitioners at all stages in creating, validating, and disseminating research.

Echoing the same sentiment, Reback and her colleagues (2002) also call for practice/research partnerships in all stages of the research-dissemination-utilization process. They stress the importance of equal partnerships with bilateral communication and nonhierarchical collaboration. Bogenschneider and colleagues (2000) connect research and policymaking through the use of Family Impact Seminars in Wisconsin, and they identify pragmatic practices that again focus on partnerships for strengthening the dissemination process. Some of their recommendations that would apply to any dissemination process include: developing varied delivery mechanisms geared to diverse learning styles; linking academic, agency, and legislative partners; taking advantage of timing; and targeting the information needs and work culture of the user.

Kirst (2000) looks at dissemination from a different perspective and identifies five key factors that affect the success of dissemination efforts. These include the source of communication, the dissemination channel, the format of communication, the message, and the characteristics of the recipient. He stresses, however, that none of these factors can be successful if the original research analysis is of low quality.

## **Methodology for Examining the Websites**

The researchers used a purposive sample of 30 research centers/institutes focusing on the field of family-school partnerships and conducted an analysis of the websites belonging to these programs. The websites in the sample are in the

public domain. All of the material from the websites was printed and cataloged in file folders during a three-month time period.

After a pilot test with two websites from a different educational content area, the questions and ratings were refined, and the two researchers checked their ratings for inter-rater reliability. The same two researchers rated all of the websites. In order to check for and limit bias, the researchers also cross-checked the ratings on a sub-sample of the actual study with three other researchers. No major differences were found.

Adapting the earlier work of the National Center for the Dissemination of Disability Research (Westbrook & Boethel, 1996, 1997) to look at research utilization in the field of family-school partnerships, the researchers looked at five key elements for each website: auspices, content, medium, targeted user, and context. Table 1 shows the elements and the related issues in effective dissemination.

Table 1. Elements of Dissemination and Their Relationship to Issues in Effective Dissemination

Screen	Key Elements of Dissemination	Examples of Issues in Effective Dissemination
1	Auspices – university, agency, foundation, private organization, governmental entity	Competence Credibility Experience Skills
2	Content – research area or focus	Methodology Outcomes Comprehensiveness Utility Cost effectiveness
3	Medium(s) – website, newsletter, publications, trainings, listservs	Physical capacity Timeliness Accessibility Clarity
4	Targeted User	Perceived relevance Readiness to change Capacity to use information
5	Context	Current issues in discipline Politics Economic climate

## Results

All 30 of the websites could easily pass the first screen; it was clear that they had competence, credibility, experience, and skills. The websites were under

the auspices of several different kinds of organizations, all with national and international credibility. The auspices included universities, private foundations, public associations, and non-profit organizations. Many of the websites had multiple, collaborative auspices. They all had records of research or research dissemination. Staff members had doctoral degrees and practice experience.

The other screen that was easy to examine was the medium for dissemination. There was a range of methods. As Table 2 illustrates, all 30 had Internet access, though two of the sites were not very user-friendly nor updated frequently. Ninety percent of the sites had a database of research, and most sites (80%) had downloadable publications. The quality of the databases varied. Some sites had a large database, current research, and excellent search criteria, but others had more limited offerings. Only one or two sites offered such luxuries as digital movie clips, free cd or video, or intranet. The most interesting sites used a full array of the mediums for dissemination.

Table 2. Types of Mediums Used for Dissemination

Medium (n=30)	Number of Sites Using Medium	Percent of Sites Using Medium
Internet	30	100%
Database of research	27	90%
Downloadable publications	24	80%
News articles & briefs	23	76%
Annual reports	12	40%
Conferences	11	36%
Video for purchase	11	36%
Networking/mentoring	10	33%
Technical assistance online	7	23%
FAQ section	8	26%
Event calendar	5	16%
Discussion board	5	16%
Partnership library	5	16%
Speeches online	3	10%
Replication tool kits	2	6%
Power Points online	2	6%
Articles to purchase	2	6%
Digital clips/podcasts	2	6%
Testimonials	1	3%
Free CD/video/DVD	1	3%
Intranet to subscribers	1	3%

The screens for content, targeted user, and context were more difficult to rate. The content descriptors of methodology, outcomes, comprehensiveness, utility, and cost-effectiveness did not apply to every website. Most sites contained composites of many different research studies. The descriptor that was

most appropriate was comprehensiveness. Comprehensiveness is defined as inclusive and including a wide variety of parental involvement research and information. Only 5 of the 30 sites (16%) could be considered comprehensive.

The researchers were not able to rate the targeted user descriptors. The information on perceived relevance to the user, the user's readiness to change, and the user's capacity to use information was not available because, in most cases, the researchers did not know who was actually using the website. A few sites did provide counters and user-feedback options. One of the sites provided an ongoing listserv, and another requested the completion of a user survey if you downloaded materials. One site requested that you provide feedback on the appropriateness of the material and how you used it after each monthly newsletter that was distributed. The majority of the sites were more geared to educators and professionals rather than to family and community members.

Since the researchers reviewed all of the websites at the same time, the current issues in the field, politics, and economic climate did not vary. Context would be important if we were looking at the process of dissemination across time periods or across different targeted users.

The good news from this study is that there were some promising practices in place that will help bridge the gap between research and practice and also help family-school partnership programs improve their own websites. "Promising practices" is used to describe best practices that show potential for bridging the gap between research and practice. Table 3 describes a few of the best family-school partnership websites that disseminate research to practitioners and the community. The list is only illustrative, not exhaustive; there are other websites that have some excellent features. Following are general characteristics shared by all the best examples of websites:

- Audience input
- Downloadable materials
- Focus on targeted audiences
- Links to other resources
- Publications and resources
- Technical assistance
- Timely with regular updates
- User-friendly

Table 3. Some Examples of Promising Practices from Five Family-School Partnership Websites\*

Organization	See individual web addresses below for examples	Specific Promising Practices
Center for Mental Health in Schools	<a href="http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/temp/home.htm">http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/temp/home.htm</a>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Feedback Link</li> <li>• First Visit Section</li> <li>• Hot Topics</li> <li>• Network &amp; Interact</li> <li>• Online Clearinghouse</li> <li>• Practitioner Exchange</li> <li>• Table of Contents</li> <li>• Weekly News</li> </ul>
Family Involvement Network of Educators (FINE) Harvard Family Research Project	<a href="http://www.gse.harvard.edu/hfrp/projects/fine.html">http://www.gse.harvard.edu/hfrp/projects/fine.html</a>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Evaluation Exchange</li> <li>• FINE Forum</li> <li>• Membership</li> <li>• Member Insights</li> <li>• Monthly Announcements</li> <li>• Research Links</li> <li>• What's New</li> </ul>
National Center for Family and Community Connections with Schools Southwest Education Development Laboratory (SEDL)	<a href="http://www.sedl.org/connections">http://www.sedl.org/connections</a>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Connection Collection (searchable)</li> <li>• Publications in Spanish &amp; English</li> <li>• Research Syntheses</li> <li>• Strategy Briefs (text)</li> <li>• Strategy Briefs (interactive)</li> <li>• Tool Kits</li> </ul>
National Coalition for Parent Involvement in Education (NCPPIE)	<a href="http://www.ncpie.org">http://www.ncpie.org</a>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Action Briefs</li> <li>• Monthly Updates</li> <li>• Organizational Database</li> <li>• Resources Categorized</li> <li>• Reviews of Research</li> <li>• Searchable Site</li> <li>• Videos</li> </ul>
National Network of Partnership Schools (NNPS) Johns Hopkins University	<a href="http://www.csos.jhu.edu/P2000/index.htm">http://www.csos.jhu.edu/P2000/index.htm</a>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Awards</li> <li>• Membership</li> <li>• NNPS Model</li> <li>• Professional Development</li> <li>• Promising Practices (annually)</li> <li>• Research Summaries</li> <li>• Success Stories</li> </ul>

\*These are just a few examples of websites with promising examples. The listing of promising practices is not exhaustive; it is for illustration only.

Interactive websites hold great promise for increasing the use of research. The sites that offered online technical assistance, mentoring, and discussion engage the user in a dialogue and offer the prospect of ongoing improvement in translating research to practice. These websites sent a clear message of openness and partnership between the research and practice communities.

Being current is another telling sign of an effective website. The website of the Academic Development Institute ([www.adi.org](http://www.adi.org)) began publishing this journal online, available freely without a subscription, in Fall 2007; this is an excellent strategy for disseminating the research in a timely manner and sharing it with a wide audience.

Although only two sites used digital movie clips, using digital clips was an excellent way to see research put into practice. The visual and auditory demonstration of a practice might be appealing to many users who are accustomed to brief television and Internet clips. Podcasts are a new addition to websites, and the Intercultural Development Research Association has some excellent examples on their website ([www.idra.org](http://www.idra.org)). For example, one podcast talked about a new publication in which the IDRA Parental Involvement Resource Center was featured and also provided links to free copies of the publication.

Replication tool kits were not used often, but they also hold much promise. SEDL ([www.sedl.org](http://www.sedl.org)) is known for some excellent tool kits that include notebooks, cds, and interactive modules. The sites that had tool kits usually had a full array of options and also required feedback about the results of using the tool kits. Card (2001) discusses the use of tool kits as a best practice because users are required to reevaluate the program in their location to see if it is still effective. The results are used to edit, clarify, and strengthen the research-based intervention.

Another promising practice was that a few sites were bilingual and offered publication summaries in English and Spanish. Others offered the same information in a variety of formats. For example, you could get the same information from a short video clip, an audiotaped speech, a news brief, a case study, or a formal research report. This flexibility in delivery methods increases the possibility of reaching diverse audiences with diverse learning styles. Varied methods of delivery also increase opportunities for families and community members to learn about research.

On the technical side, there are some excellent sites that discuss web design. Although website design was not the focus of this analysis, the subject is related to how content is accessed and received. A recent article "10 Ideas for Excellent Web Design" by Matt Knowles (2008; see <http://www.aestheticdesign.com/philosophy.html>) provides some helpful suggestions for making websites unique, simple, easy to navigate, and affordable.

## Next Steps

To understand dissemination and its role in research utilization in the field of family-school partnerships, we need to do much more work. This work should begin by increasing collaboration between researchers and family-school partnership practitioners. Collaboration is a two-way process, and both researchers and practitioners must be involved at each stage. Practitioners must explain their interests and needs, and researchers must listen. Researchers must ask what the research needs and interests are before they start; they must involve practitioners from the very first step. Dissemination of research is also not a one-way street. When the research is disseminated, there needs to be ample opportunity for dialogue and feedback about what the results mean. Researchers must involve practitioners in the whole research-dissemination process.

Because many of the websites that were reviewed in this study were never clear about their targeted audience, it was difficult to determine if they were actually implementing their dissemination plan. If we talk with our colleagues in writing classes, we quickly realize that “audience” has been a missing link in the research utilization and dissemination process for family-school partnership research. Steven Hale (2006) suggests that writing classes begin with reminding students to think about their audience before they write one word. Instructors remind students that knowing your audience will not only make the process of writing easier, it will also help you get your message across. Understanding your audience is directly related to your purpose and goal. If family-school partnership researchers understood their audiences more clearly in research, perhaps they would be clearer about their goals and develop more appropriate research and dissemination methods for the communities they are trying to reach. If family-school partnership practitioners were involved in research from the beginning (asking questions, discussing design, perhaps even collecting data), they would be more apt to use the results. If practitioners were involved early, they would also be able to assist in appropriate dissemination strategies. Understanding and involving the audience of family-school practitioners would definitely affect both the style and the activities that researchers use.

From the very beginning of the research design, family-school partnership researchers need to have a dissemination plan that is focused on a specific, targeted audience, and then ask a series of questions that look at congruence between stated goals and measured effect. Because programs must be transportable to other sites at reasonable costs (in dollars and effort), generalizability to other audiences is also a key issue. Key questions need to be asked about dissemination planning, dissemination monitoring, impact assessment, and economic efficiency for the targeted audience.

Examples of dissemination planning questions for family-school partnership programs would include:

- What is the extent and distribution of the target population?
- Whom do research centers really want to reach?
- Do they only want to reach other researchers, or do they want to reach family and community members?
- Is the program designed in conformity with its intended goals and are chances of successful implementation maximized?

Right now most dissemination efforts seem to begin with a focus on the medium of dissemination and do not begin with the targeted user, the family-school partnership practitioner. Even though many family-school partnership websites do an excellent job with specific mediums and have lots of “bells and whistles” on their websites, they may be missing the targeted audience because they did not connect with them in the beginning. Just as good evaluation practice requires a logic model, good dissemination practice demands a logic model complete with goal, input, outputs, outcome, and a clear focus on the audience of family-school partnership practitioners.

Unless researchers and family-school partnership practitioners get together and examine the dissemination issue, researchers will continue to produce research that is neglected or ignored by family-school partnership practitioners. Just as publishing an article is an inadequate approach to dissemination, only posting research on a website is inadequate. Posting on websites is an important step, but it is not the only step. We will never improve partnerships in the field of family-school partnership research if the research does not reach family and community partners.

Practitioners cannot simply throw up their hands and say this is a problem that researchers need to fix. Family-school partnership practitioners need to step up to the plate and request that researchers work with them from step one and throughout the research-dissemination process. If practitioners want research that is relevant and helpful, they must be willing to work with researchers throughout the process. Just as family-school partnership programs work with all their stakeholders to decide on annual goals and programs, they need to work with researchers to be part of the entire research-dissemination process including website development and use. Family-school partnership practitioners can no longer be only receivers of information; they need to be active participants and ask to be included in this entire process. Family-school practitioners are key stakeholders in the research-dissemination process and need to be included from step one and throughout the process.

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