Research-based practices forge strong family and community partnerships

By Valerie von Frank

When schools have effective partnerships with families and the community, both students and teachers benefit. Research increasingly is finding that strong partnerships benefit students. Key findings include:

• Students whose families are involved in their learning earn better grades, enroll in higher-level programs, have higher graduation rates, and are more likely to enroll in postsecondary education.

• When families take an active interest in what students are learning, students display more positive attitudes toward school and behave better both in and out of school (Henderson, Mapp, Johnson, & Davies, 2007, p. 2).

Now, the MetLife Survey of the American Teacher: Teachers, Parents and the Economy (2011) finds that effective partnerships contribute to greater teacher job satisfaction and teachers who are more optimistic about children’s future success. In addition, parents in schools that work actively to engage them in partnership are more optimistic about their children’s futures and view other parents and school staff as valuable resources, including parents in urban areas or those who have less formal education (MetLife, 2011, p. 54).

“It’s unusual to see something as dramatic as this (MetLife) finding,” said Joyce Epstein, director of the Center on School, Family, and Community Partnerships and the National Network of Partnership Schools at Johns Hopkins University and a leading expert on school, family, and community partnerships.

Epstein said the importance of family, school, and community partnerships is sometimes overlooked as schools home in on academic programs, not recognizing that strong partnerships can help improve student achievement. The key, she said, is using partnership practices that tie to school improvement goals and basing programs on what research

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**EPSTEIN’S FRAMEWORK OF 6 TYPES OF INVOLVEMENT**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Parenting: Help all families establish home environments to support children as students.</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Provide information to all families who want or need it, not just to the few who can attend workshops or meetings at the school.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Enable families to share information with schools about culture, background, children’s talents, and needs.</td>
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<td>2. Communicating: Design effective forms of school-to-home and home-to-school communications about school programs.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Consider parents who do not speak English well, do not read well, or need large type.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Establish clear two-way channels for communications from home to school and from school to home.</td>
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<td>3. Volunteering: Recruit and organize parent help and support.</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Recruit volunteers widely so that all families know that their time and talents are welcome.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Make flexible schedules for volunteers, assemblies, and events to enable parents who work to participate.</td>
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<tr>
<td>4. Learning at home: Provide information and ideas to families about how to help students at home.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Design and organize a regular schedule of interactive homework (weekly or bimonthly) that gives students responsibility for discussing important things they are learning with their families.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Coordinate family-linked homework activities, if students have several teachers.</td>
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<td>5. Decision making: Include parents in school decisions, developing parent leaders and representatives.</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Include parent leaders from all racial, ethnic, socioeconomic, and other groups in the school.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Offer training to enable leaders to serve as representatives of other families, with input from and return of information to all parents.</td>
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<tr>
<td>6. Collaborating with the community: Identify and integrate resources and services from the community to strengthen school programs, family practices, and student learning and development.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Solve turf problems of responsibilities, funds, staff, and locations for collaborative activities.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Assure equity of opportunities for students and families to participate in community programs or to obtain services.</td>
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*Source: www.csos.jhu.edu/p2000/sixtypes.htm.*

Continued from p. 1

has shown to be effective. Epstein’s network publishes annual compilations of best practices in the series *Promising Partnership Practices* that show what schools and districts are doing to forge stronger community ties.

“It really becomes about bringing research-based practice to the fore,” Epstein continued, “so that teachers at all levels will understand the new directions that are out there and can replace the old ways of thinking about family involvement with the structures and processes that will actually let them proceed in ways that focus on students’ success — and by that we mean goal-linked partnership practices.”

Educators must focus on engaging partners in ways that use their work and time to help students do their best academically or behaviorally, Epstein said. Educators developing effective partnerships must begin by learning to plan goal-linked activities that are tied to student learning. Schools that join Epstein’s network form school-based action teams comprising teachers, parents, the principal, community partners, and others. Leaders train these team members, who then determine whether they want to create their one-year action plan based on school improvement goals, or focus instead on the six types of family involvement (see sidebar above). Teams also assess the quality of their partnership programs and results.

“Otherwise, it’s just fluff,” Epstein said. “And these days, with the budget crises and economic distress, we can’t waste people’s time with feel-good activities.”

Having a well-planned program enables educators to evaluate their work, she said.

“That has been a true missing link forever,” Epstein said, “the idea that you can look at the structure of how this work is planned and implemented to evaluate progress and then change and improve in the next school year.”

**EIGHT ELEMENTS MAKE EFFECTIVE PARTNERSHIPS**

Epstein says effective partnerships have eight common elements, basing her conclusion on extensive data from validated evaluation surveys of network schools over time (Epstein & Ganss, 2012).

“Programs that have these things in place do better in outreach to challenging families, families who don’t speak

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English, moms who work, and all of those challenging groups we know schools face,” Epstein said.

Leadership. “If principals don’t want to go a new direction, it isn’t going to happen,” Epstein said. Commitment to family partnerships also must come at the district level. According to Epstein’s data, district leaders conducted an average of 10.5 of district-level activities listed in the survey, including conducting workshops for parents, reviewing budgets for partnerships, disseminating best practices across schools, reviewing the district’s policy on parent involvement, connecting with other colleagues about family and community partnerships, and posting information about the partnerships on the district website. District-level leaders can help schools write action plans, understand the framework of six types of involvement (see sidebar), meet with principals to discuss partnerships, and help organize committees to distribute leadership.

Teamwork. Successful programs have shared leadership that involves teachers, parents, and administrators, Epstein said. They must work together to create a plan for the year linked to the school improvement plan so that what families and community partners engage with has meaning for student success, she said.

Written plans. Schools and districts that showed effectiveness write an action plan for partnerships that is included in an appendix of the school improvement plan so that families’ actions are linked to teachers’ goals and students have multiple supports to achieve academically, Epstein said.

Implementation. In any area — reading, math, or family/community involvement — implementation is critical.

“You can have a plan, but if it doesn’t get implemented, it’s just sitting on a shelf,” Epstein said.

Evaluation. “Evaluation means not just doing an exit evaluation of whether parents liked a family night, which those who attend tend to do, but to assess the quality of the school-based program and how the teamwork is working,” Epstein said. These elements are measured in the NNPS Update survey, she said.

Collegial support. Colleagues include those in the school, district, and community, both families and businesses, Epstein said.

Adequate budget. Budget is measured by per pupil expenditure so the cost of the program and funding sources are more specific, Epstein said. An adequate budget, rather than a target dollar amount, is key, she said. She called partnership programs “thrifty.” “Even for schools facing challenging financial situations, there is money to do this and to do it right,” Epstein said. “This program is about $30 per pupil per year to do this right. … to have district and school level leadership that works, that reaches out to all families, improves from year to year, that understands this is part of school improvement work.”

Networking. “Those within our network who take advantage of sharing best practices, communicating with facilitators and asking questions, or using tools and measures do better from year to year,” Epstein said.

“It’s not a secret anymore what needs to be done to do this work,” Epstein said. “What’s surprising is that it’s still difficult to get the message across that this is a component of school organization, just as a good reading program is a component of good school organization.”

REFERENCES


Valerie von Frank (valerievonfrank@aol.com) is an education writer and editor of Learning Forward’s books.
Starting points: An inventory of present practices of school, family, and community partnerships

By Karen Clark Salinas, Joyce L. Epstein, and Mavis G. Sanders
National Network of Partnership Schools, Johns Hopkins University

This inventory will help you identify your school’s present practices for each of the six types of involvement. Your action team should complete this inventory with input from teachers, parents, the school improvement team, and others, as appropriate. After you complete the inventory, write a one-year action plan for partnerships.

Directions: Check the activities that your school conducts and circle all of the grade levels presently involved. You may write in other activities for each type of involvement that your school conducts. To note how well each activity is implemented, add these symbols next to the checkbox.

* Very well implemented with all families  
+ Good start with many families  
• Needs improvement

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TYPE 1 – PARENTING: Assist families in understanding child and adolescent development and in setting home conditions that support children as students. Assist schools in understanding family backgrounds, cultures, and goals.</th>
<th>In which grades?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>q We sponsor parent education workshops and other courses or training for parents.</td>
<td>K 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11 12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>q We provide families with information on child or adolescent development.</td>
<td>K 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11 12</td>
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<tr>
<td>q We conduct family support programs with parent-to-parent discussion groups.</td>
<td>K 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11 12</td>
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<tr>
<td>q We provide families with information on developing home conditions that support learning.</td>
<td>K 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11 12</td>
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<tr>
<td>q We lend families books, audiotapes, and videotapes/DVDs on parenting or parent workshops.</td>
<td>K 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11 12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>q We sponsor home visiting programs or neighborhood meetings to help families understand schools and to help schools understand families.</td>
<td>K 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11 12</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>TYPE 2 – COMMUNICATING: Communicate effectively from school to home and from home to school about school programs and children’s progress.</th>
<th>In which grades?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>q We provide language translators/interpreters to assist families as needed.</td>
<td>K 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11 12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>q We provide clear information about report cards and how grades are earned.</td>
<td>K 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11 12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>q We provide clear information about state tests and student and school results.</td>
<td>K 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11 12</td>
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</table>

Our school newsletter includes:

| q A calendar of school events. | K 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11 12 |
| q Student activity information. | K 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11 12 |
| q Curriculum and program information. | K 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11 12 |
| q School volunteer information. | K 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11 12 |
- School policy information.  K 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11 12
- Samples of student writing and artwork.  K 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11 12
- A column to address parents’ questions.  K 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11 12
- Recognition of students, families, and community members.  K 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11 12
- A column on activities for family and community involvement.  K 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11 12
- We send home folders of student work weekly or monthly for parent review and comments.  K 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11 12
- Staff members send home positive messages about students on a regular basis.  K 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11 12
- We notify families about student awards and recognition.  K 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11 12
- We contact families of students having academic or behavior problems.  K 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11 12
- Teachers and administrators have e-mail and/or a school website to communicate with parents.  K 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11 12
- Parents have the telephone numbers and/or e-mail addresses of the school, principal, teachers, and counselors.  K 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11 12
- We have an automated phone system to deliver messages to families.  K 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11 12
- We conduct an annual survey for families to provide reactions to school programs and share information and concerns about students.  K 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11 12

**TYPE 3 – VOLUNTEERING: INVOLVEMENT AT AND FOR THE SCHOOL**

Organize volunteers and audiences to support the school and students.

In which grades?

- We conduct annual surveys to identify interests, talents, and availability of volunteers and the needs of teachers and administrators for volunteers.  K 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11 12
- We provide initial and ongoing training and guidance to our volunteers.  K 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11 12
- We have a parent room or family center for volunteer work, meetings, and resources for families.  K 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11 12

We encourage families and the community to be involved at school by:

- Assisting in classrooms (tutoring, grading papers, etc.).  K 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11 12
- Helping on trips or at parties.  K 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11 12
- Giving talks (careers, cultures, hobbies, etc.).  K 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11 12
- Monitoring halls or working in the library, cafeteria, or other areas.  K 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11 12
- Leading clubs or activities.  K 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11 12
- Serving as audiences at student assemblies, events, sports, etc.  K 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11 12
- We provide ways for families to be involved at home or in the community if they cannot volunteer at school.  K 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11 12
- We have a program to recognize and thank our volunteers.  K 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11 12
- We schedule plays, concerts, games, and other events at different times of the day or evening so that all parents can attend some activities.  K 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11 12
### TYPE 4 – LEARNING AT HOME: INVOLVEMENT IN ACADEMIC ACTIVITIES
Involves families with their children in homework, other curriculum-related activities, course and program choices, and plans for the future.

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<tr>
<th>In which grades?</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>K 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11 12</td>
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</table>

- We conduct family nights or other workshops to help parents understand school subjects and learn ways to help their children at home. K 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11 12
- We have a regular schedule of interactive homework that requires students to show and discuss what they are learning with a family member. K 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11 12
- We provide calendars with daily or weekly activities linked to grade level requirements for families to select and conduct at home. K 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11 12
- We provide summer learning packets to help students sustain school skills. K 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11 12
- We provide information on Web sites with learning resources for students. K 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11 12

### TYPE 5 – DECISION MAKING: PARTICIPATION AND LEADERSHIP
Include families as participants in school decisions, and develop parent leaders and representatives.

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<tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>K 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11 12</td>
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</table>

- We have an active PTA, PTO, or other parent organization. K 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11 12
- Parent representatives are on the school council, school improvement team, or other school committees. K 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11 12
- We have an action team for partnerships to develop a goal-oriented program with practices for all six types of involvement. K 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11 12
- Parent representatives are on a district-level advisory council or committee. K 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11 12
- We develop formal networks to link all families with their parent representatives for decision making. K 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11 12
- We use e-mail and quick surveys to obtain parents’ input and ideas on school policies. K 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11 12
- We include parent representatives in professional development workshops for members of the school council, ATP, and PTA or PTO. K 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11 12

### TYPE 6 – COLLABORATING WITH THE COMMUNITY
Coordinate resources and services from the community for families, students, and the school, and provide services to the community.

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<th>In which grades?</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>K 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11 12</td>
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</table>

- We provide a resource directory for parents and students with information on community agencies, programs, and services. K 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11 12
- We provide information on community activities that link to learning skills and talents, including summer programs for students. K 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11 12
- We offer afterschool programs for students with support from community businesses, agencies, or volunteers. K 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11 12
- We sponsor intergenerational programs with local senior citizen groups. K 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11 12
- We provide one-stop shopping for family services through partnerships of school, counseling, health, recreation, job training, and other agencies. K 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11 12
- Our school building is open for use by the community after school hours. K 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11 12

8 elements make effective family and community partnerships

According to the National Network of Partnership Schools’ *Special Report: Summary 2011 District Data* (Epstein & Ganss, 2012), the following eight elements are important for establishing effective partnership programs at the district and school levels. Use this tool to explore what types of professional learning can contribute to boosting your family and community partnership program.

**LEADERSHIP**

What kind of professional learning can you plan for principals and district-level leaders to get everyone moving in the same direction (e.g., the framework of six types of involvement, possible partnerships, how to organize committees to distribute leadership, etc.)?

**TEAMWORK**

What opportunities does your school have for shared leadership that involves teachers, parents, and administrators (e.g. creating a family and community engagement plan for the year that is linked to the school improvement plan)?

**WRITTEN PLANS**

How can you encourage your school or district to include your family and community engagement plan within the school improvement plan in a way that demonstrates that families’ actions are linked to teachers’ goals?

**IMPLEMENTATION**

What challenges does your school face in implementing your family and community engagement plan and how can you address these?

**EVALUATION**

Do the evaluation methods for your engagement activities assess the quality of the program and teamwork?

**COLLEGIAL SUPPORT**

How can you build support of colleagues in the school, district, and community for your engagement plan?

**ADEQUATE BUDGET**

Who would be a key ally in ensuring your family and community engagement program has an adequate per-pupil budget? How can you best communicate the importance of properly funding these efforts?

**NETWORKING**

How can you and other school leaders join or create networks to share best practices, tools, and measures?

Among the six types of parental and community involvement identified by Epstein, most teachers (90%) and parents (78%) rate their school as excellent or good on having effective communications about school programs and student progress. In contrast, only 56% of teachers and 61% of parents rate their school as excellent or good at assisting families with parenting skills and setting home conditions to support children as students.

Teachers in schools with high parent engagement are more than twice as likely as those in schools with low parent engagement to say they are very satisfied with their job (57% vs. 25%).

Parents in schools with high parent engagement are more likely than those in schools with low engagement to be optimistic that student achievement will be better in five years (73% vs. 45%) and to agree that they and their child’s teachers work together to help their child succeed in school (96% vs. 55%).