The Principal's Role in Improving and Sustaining Parent Involvement*

Angus MacNeil
Melissa Patin

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Abstract

Principals and teachers need parental involvement in order to successfully educate students.

1 Parent Involvement

Literature supports the notion that parent involvement has a positive impact on student achievement and success in school. Parent involvement is not only incremental in the development of the child but also motivates the schools to function at a higher standard by constantly improving practices.The question for many school administrators is how a principal goes about the process of improving school and parent relations so that the student will have improved learning outcomes.

First, a climate of trust and collaboration between the school and parents is essential for effective planning to establish effective parent involvement programs. A principal must ensure that effective communication is in place and that parents know that their participation in school matters and is critical to student success.

Second, recognize that there is no "cookie cutter" for parental involvement. Each school's requirements will be different, and will be driven by different strengths, and backgrounds, such as its history, culture and climate and student performance. A careful needs assessment and knowledge of the norms and values must be studied before a plan is agreed upon by the stakeholders of the school.

Third, parent involvement is often thought of as a means to raise money or plan special school activities but in reality parent involvement includes any number of activities including reading with children, tutoring, and in some cases monitoring the cafeteria! There is evidence in the literature that validates that most parents would like to be involved with the school but need some direction from school personnel on how to help (Epstein & Jansorn, 2004). Some parent may even need training on how they can help their child with their homework math and reading skills, science fair projects and other academic activities. The important thing is to encourage involvement from parents in whatever form or fashion that they can provide.

2 Rationale

Parents need to know that whatever they can give in terms of time or resources is appreciated and that it is important to the academic and social/emotional development of the child. When parents value education and show it through encouraging their child and supporting the school the student realizes the importance

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of the school and learning. Most people may think that parent involvement describes only those parents that give time at the school or attend all the activities. In reality parent involvement is much more.

Christie (2005) identifies volunteering at the school to be on the lowest rung on the ladder of potential activities for parent involvement. However, its importance should not be trivialized as it does have a positive impact on the student achievement and esteem. Children like to see parents at school and teachers appreciate the hands-on help they get from parents. Christie ranks attendance at school conferences and activities the next lowest on her ladder of importance followed by participation on committees, tutoring and reading one-on-one. More important is that parents make their student accountable for homework, supplying them a good study environment and making sure that they attend school everyday. The highest level of involvement, in Christie's view, is parents having high expectations for their kids in terms of academics and behavior. The parent that admonishes their student that trouble at school means â€œdouble trouble at homeâ€ helps to focus their student on being successful and taking advantage of the instruction of the teachers. It is absolutely imperative that students present themselves at school with the appropriate disposition to learn. Anything less will result in lower academic performance. Principals should look closely at the relationships between the teachers, the parents and the community. If schools and parents are connected then there will be a solid relationship, stable attendance at conferences and meetings, parents willing to help, varied methods of communication and materials, collaborative relations between home and school and finally communication between parties is successful. With these elements in place the school and home are connected and the outlook for parent involvement is promising (Wherry, 2005).

While these are the signs of a connection between home and school, research from The Parent Institute (2005) showed that teachers and parents often do not rate the significance of parent involvement options in the same way. When asked to rank in order of importance the things parents can do at home to help their child do better in school, teacher and parents had very different views. Teachers thought that the most important thing they can do is to read with their children while parents felt that talking to their children was the most important thing they could do (Wherry, 2005).

This illustrates the wide range of interpretations of the notion of parent involvement. We can learn from this that parents and schools need to establish goals together to effectively meet the needs of the children. Administrators, teachers and parents need to communicate and clarify expectations so that programs can be developed that effectively address student success initiatives. When these parties have agreed upon expectations and have established mutual goals and values then the parties become truly connected. The move towards higher standards, greater accountability and additional and more difficult assessment practices requires a commitment from not just school personnel but families and communities (Machen, Wilson, & Nota 2005).

A study by Nistler and Angela (2000) found that once schools were able to remove the barriers to parent participation, involvement increased. Many parents are simply unable to get to school so efforts need to be increased to accommodate those who need transportation or have small children and need childcare. Solutions include carpooling, providing childcare at the school or forming networks of parents that can help each other out. Clearly, there is a commonality for improving and sustaining parent involvement. the development of a collaborative program that focuses on such things as effective communication, providing multiple opportunities for involvement, removing obstacles to involvement and providing parent training that will increase awareness of the their child's potential (Machen, Wilson & Notar 2005).

One of the most fundamental ways to improve the parent school connection is to improve the teacher - parent relationship. Since teachers are the primary connection with the school that relationship is critical to student success and parent involvement. Teachers must learn how to communicate with parents in an effective and informative way. Evidence exists that when the initial contact between parent and teacher is positive future negative incidents will not replace the initial impression (Million, 2003). By establishing a relationship with parents early in the year a foundation is built for future involvement. Teachers must open the door to parent involvement and enlist the help of parents the first day of school. Having a list of "needs" ready at the Open House or posted outside the classroom makes parents feel like they are integral part of the education process. An environment that welcomes parents in a non-threatening manner enhances the likelihood that the parents will want to volunteer at the school. Many schools recruit parents early in the

year, sometimes even before school start.

Principals should identify some of the parents that are enthusiastic about volunteering and enlist them to recruit additional parents. A strong parent-teacher organization is a must for successful school volunteer programs. . These organizations will plan and organize fundraising events, provide support for teachers and work to include all parents in the community. Parent volunteers, with effective leadership can provide support that can make the school a better place while not being overly intrusive. The opportunities for parents to help are endless and the rewards are great for all parties. Schools must make concerted efforts to nurture parent involvement. By using a variety of modes of communication from email to flyers to phone calls so more parents can be reached. Principals and teachers need to be specific about what their needs are and how parents can best help the school.

Teachers and administrators must make a concerted effort to acknowledge the volunteers and show appreciation for all efforts both large and small. It is imperative that the principal stay in close communication with those parents that spearhead volunteer efforts so they can stay knowledgeable of what is happening. The leaders of the parent groups must have open lines of communication with the principal. They will know the status of volunteer efforts and those that are contributing, which gives the principal an opportunity to recognize those individuals - contributions must be acknowledged and appreciation must be extended for parent involvement to be sustained (Hasley, 2004).

3 References

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