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Network on Early Childhood Education and Care

BACKGROUND FOR PRESENTATION AND DISCUSSION

Part I

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This document was written by Dr. Joyce Epstein for the 9th meeting of the OECD Network on Early Childhood Education and Care on "Family and Community Engagement" held on 4-5 July 2011 at OECD headquarters in Paris, France. Dr. Epstein is Director of the Center on School, Family, and Community Partnerships and National Network of Partnership Schools as well as Research Professor of Sociology at Johns Hopkins University.

Dr. Epstein has provided supplemental reading (Part II) as background material for the meeting, and this document's OLIS code is EDU/EDPC/ECEC/RD(2011)2.

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BACKGROUND FOR PRESENTATION AND DISCUSSION

Reading (Part 1)

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(1) Summary from:

Epstein, J. L. and Sheldon, S. B. (2006), "Moving forward: Ideas for research on school, family, and community partnerships" in C. F. Conrad and R. Serlin (eds.), *SAGE Handbook for research in education: Engaging ideas and enriching inquiry*, Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, pp. 117-137.

This chapter discusses seven principles for improving research, policy, and practice for more effective programs of family and community involvement. A summary of the seven principles (updated for OECD meeting) is outlined below.

(2) Reading from:

Epstein, J. L. *et al.* (2009), *School, family, and community partnerships: Your handbook for action, third edition*, Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press. [See EDU/EDPC/ECEC/RD(2011)2]

This chapter summarizes the theory of overlapping spheres of influence to explain the *shared responsibilities* of home, school, and community for children's learning and development. It also charts the research-based framework of *six types of involvement, challenges* that must be solved for each type of involvement in order to engage all families, and expected *results* of well-designed and well-implemented practices.

See the basic structures and processes that are needed to develop effective partnership programs. For example, one key structure at the school level is an Action Team for Partnerships (ATP) – a committee of the School Council or School Improvement Team. The ATP includes teachers, administrators, parents, and others who plan, implement, evaluate, and continually improve school programs of partnership.

With knowledge of the underlying theory, basic structures, and useful processes, leaders in preschools, elementary, middle and high schools, districts and states/ministries will be able to develop, strengthen, and sustain goal-oriented partnership programs that contribute to student success.

SUMMARY: NEW DIRECTIONS FOR MORE EFFECTIVE PROGRAMS OF SCHOOL, FAMILY, AND COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIPS: TOPICS FOR RESEARCH, POLICY, AND PRACTICE

There is no topic in education on which there is greater agreement than the need for family and community involvement.

- **Teachers and administrators** want to know how to work with parents in positive ways and how to involve the community to increase student success across the grades.
- **Parents** want to know if their children’s preschools, elementary, middle, and high schools are providing high-quality education, how to help their children do their best each year, and how to connect and communicate with teachers and administrators.
- **Students** want to succeed in school. The youngest children are eager, energetic, curious, and connected to their preschool teachers and to their parents. At all age levels, children seek guidance, support, and encouragement from their parents, teachers, other family members, and others in the community.

When partnerships are working well, children retain their love of learning, and, regardless of their achievement levels, assume the role of student. These students proceed through the grades to graduate from high school and plan their futures.

Despite strong agreement about the importance of these goals, most schools, districts, and states still need help in developing effective policies and comprehensive programs of school, family, and community partnerships.

For over 30 years, researchers at Johns Hopkins University have worked with educators, parents, students, community partners, policy leaders, and other researchers to learn how preschools, elementary, middle, and high schools can develop and maintain more effective programs of partnerships.

- We have worked with district, state, and national education leaders to understand how they write and support policies that encourage schools to improve partnership programs.
- We have collaborated with organizations that assist schools, districts, and states in improving their policies and programs of family and community involvement.
- We have continued an active research agenda to study the nature and effects of systematic interventions that increase family and community involvement.

With many partners and participants, we have learned how programs of school, family, and community partnerships can be organized to improve schools, strengthen families, and help students succeed.

Needed New Directions for Research, Policy, and Practice

With many partners, we have learned that seven principles guide new directions for writing attainable policies, developing excellent programs and practices, and improving research on school, family, and community partnerships. (See the full discussion of these principles in Epstein and Sheldon, 2006.)

1. **School, family, and community partnerships is a better term than parental involvement.** The concept of *partnership* recognizes that parents, educators, and others in the community share responsibility for students' learning and development. My theory of *overlapping spheres of influence* posits that students learn more when parents, educators, and others in the community work together to guide and support student learning and development (Epstein, 1987, 2011). In this model, three contexts – home, school, and community – overlap with unique and combined influences on children through the interactions of parents, educators, community partners, and students across contexts. Each context “moves” closer or farther from the others as a result of external forces (*e.g.* time, backgrounds, philosophies, actions of home, school, community) and internal social interactions of parents, teachers, students, and community members.
2. **School, family, and community partnerships is a multidimensional concept.** A framework of six types of involvement – the result of research and exemplary practices – helps schools develop programs that involve all families in different ways.
3. **A program of school, family, and community partnerships is an essential component of school and classroom organization.** No longer off-to-the-side, family and community involvement must be planned and evaluated just as any aspect of school improvement. In each school, an Action Team for Partnerships—a committee of educators, parents, and other partners—works with colleagues to plan, implement, evaluate, and continually improve the outreach and quality of the school's partnership programs.

Over the past few years, our studies of partnership program development identified eight essential elements that contributed to the improvement of program quality from one year to the next. These include: (1) **strong leadership**, (2) **teamwork**, (3) **annual written plans**, (4) **well-implemented activities**, (5) **adequate funding**, (6) **thoughtful evaluations**, (7) **strong collegial support and networking**, and (8) **continuous planning for improvement**.

In the third edition of *School, Family, and Community Partnerships: Your Handbook for Action*, my colleagues and I provide step-by-step strategies so that every program will take new directions and include these essential elements. We translate lessons learned in research and fieldwork into practical approaches that will assist any school, district, or state/ministry with partnership program development (see attached reading of Chapter 1).

4. **Programs of school, family, and community partnerships require multi-level leadership.** Although educators in a single school, working with parents and others, may organize a partnership program, district leaders play important roles in establishing a “culture of partnerships” and in assisting *all* elementary, middle, and high schools in the district to develop and sustain programs that involve students' families in productive ways. State leaders, too, may support policies and take actions that help districts and schools understand partnerships as an organizational imperative. University research centers and implementation leaders also may play important roles in guiding and studying effective partnership programs. Leaders at all levels may work to “scale up” the quality of a partnership program as a permanent component of school organization at the preschool, elementary, and secondary levels.
5. **Programs of school, family, and community partnerships must focus on increasing student learning and development.** No longer partnerships-for-partnership-sake, strong programs of family and community involvement ensure that all communications among partners and all involvement activities are purposeful and productive. Practices to engage parents, community members, and others need to be linked to important goals for students.

At the preschool level, this includes increasing students' literacy, numeracy, and social readiness skills, and ensuring a successful transition to primary school. At all grade levels, goal-linked activities for family and community involvement help students improve attendance, achievement, behavior, and other indicators of success in school. When goal-linked family and community involvement are well-designed and well-implemented, students increase the targeted skills, attitudes, and behaviors.

6. **All programs of school, family, and community partnerships are about equity.** Partnership programs must engage all families in all communities, not just parents who are easy to reach. Some parents are easily involved in school and in their children's education. The challenge—that must be solved—is to organize policies, programs, and practices that enable all families and partners in the local community to help children do their best in school at every age- and grade level. As partnership programs are implemented and improved from year to year, outreach improves and parents who, typically, were uninvolved become engaged with the school and in their children's education.
7. **Methods of research on school, family, and community partnerships must continue to improve.** The relatively young field of school, family, and community partnerships will continue to grow if researchers ask new and pointed questions about the implementation and results of involvement activities. Knowledge will grow, too, with better measures, larger and more diverse samples, and with the use of rigorous methods of data collection, including surveys, in-depth case studies, experimental or quasi-experimental designs, longitudinal studies, multi-level studies and analyses, field tests, program evaluations, and policy analyses.

Researchers must move from exploratory and descriptive studies to confirmatory studies and targeted evaluations about *how* to develop effective programs of school, family, and community partnerships develop and affect families and students. Researchers must go beyond documenting inequities to identify programs and practices that promote greater equity in the involvement of diverse families and the effects of involvement on indicators of success for students in elementary, middle, and high schools. New research should increase knowledge of the factors that produce the most effective (1) leadership for partnerships, (2) quality of program plans, (3) outreach to involve more families, (4) responses by families and community partners, and (5) the impact on student achievement and other indicators of success in school.

These new directions change the way partnerships are understood in schools, districts, state departments/ministries of education.

- For example, when an Action Team for Partnerships is an official school committee and its written plans are part of annual school improvement plans, more family and community involvement activities will be conducted and more and different parents will be engaged.
- When activities implemented *and* evaluated, outreach to families will increase and the quality of the partnership program will improve from year to year.

These and other changes are needed to turn activities that were accidental and peripheral to school improvement into well-planned and intentional programs that are central to school improvement and that contribute to student success.

Preschools, elementary, middle, and high schools can use *common research-based structures and processes* (e.g. an Action Team for Partnerships, a written One-Year Action Plan, reliable evaluations of

progress) to organize their partnership programs, *and customize* their procedures and activities to improve the school's partnership climate and meet important goals for student success.

Of course, each school, district, and state is different from the next. Each serves different populations of students and families, has different improvement goals, and faces unique challenges for helping all students succeed in school. We have found that all programs benefit from proven structures, but each site must tailor or customize its plans and practices to meet specific goals for student success. This mix of formal structures and flexible practices is a winning combination for involving families and community partners in ways that benefit students, families, and schools. To see how this works in diverse communities, visit www.partnershipschools.org and click on Success Stories.

Conclusion

If family involvement is important for student success, as decades of research indicates, then we must address the important question: *How can more families – indeed all families – become involved in their children's education in ways that will contribute to student success from the earliest grades on.*

Studies of parental involvement over the past twenty-five years have set a firm base on which new research can build to increase understanding of programs and practices of school, family, and community partnerships. The early work yielded a useful theory and framework of six types of involvement that have guided research, policy, and practice. Studies to date have identified and explored many aspects of the involvement of parents, teachers, administrators, and students. Researchers have begun to inspect, dissect, and identify components and effects of partnership programs in schools and school districts. By framing the field, the early work also shows that much is left to learn.

Despite the challenges of studying schools, families, and communities simultaneously, it is necessary to “think new” about how students learn and develop as they progress from preschool through high school. Well-documented problems with student achievement, motivation, attitudes about education, school behavior, and future plans are partly due to “old think” that *separated* school and students from home and community, leaving teachers to work on their own, isolated from other influential people in children's lives.

The seven principles featured in this chapter should help researchers think in new ways about the structures and processes of family and community involvement that will help educators, parents, and community partners work more *systematically, organizationally, and collaboratively* to support student success.

ADDITIONAL RELATED REFERENCES AND RESOURCES

Other references related to the OECD topics of family and community involvement in research, policy, and practice, based on the research conducted by the researchers at my Center.

Community Connections

Sanders, M. G. (2009), “Community Involvement in School Improvement: The Little Extra That Makes a Big Difference”, Chapter 1.2 (pp. 31-39) in Epstein, J. L. *et al.* (2009).

Results for Students

Sheldon, S. B. (2009), “Improving Student Outcomes with School, Family, and Community Partnerships: A Research Review”, Chapter 1.3 (pp. 40-56) in Epstein, J. L. *et al.* (2009).

Policy Issues and Recommendations

Epstein, J. L. (2011), “Policy Implications”, Chapter 4 (pp. 299-346) in *School, family, and community partnerships: Preparing educators and improving schools, Second edition*, Boulder, CO: Westview Press.

Epstein, J. L. (2009), “Develop District and State Leadership for Partnerships”, Chapter 7 (pp. 235-273) in Epstein, J. L. *et al.* (2009).

Preschool Programs Using These Research-Based Approaches in Practice

Visit www.partnershipschools.org

- a) On the homepage in the SEARCH box, write *early childhood* for reports on practices from sites in the National Network of Partnership Schools (NNPS). Also search on the word *preschool*.
- b) In the section called Success Stories, follow the links to:
 - Partnership Awards and see <http://www.csos.jhu.edu/p2000/awards/2009/organization/starting-point.htm>
 - *Promising Partnership Practices* – annual books with examples of best practices. Some involve Early Education and Care Centers and other preschools that are members of NNPS.

In each book of *Promising Partnership Practices* see the section on Transitions for effective family and community involvement in transitions to primary school:

Also on transitions, see this resource from **School Mental Health Project (SMHP) at UCLA: *Transitions: Turning Risks into Opportunities for Student Support***
Click on: <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/transitions/transitions.pdf>