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BACKGROUND FOR PRESENTATION AND DISCUSSION

Part II

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Reading (Part 2)

OECD Network on Early Childhood Education and Care

Background for Presentation and Discussion July 4, 2011
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1.1 School, Family, and Community Partnerships: Caring for the Children We Share

Joyce L. Epstein

The way schools care about children is reflected in the way schools care about the children's families. If educators view children simply as *students*, they are likely to see the family as separate from the school. That is, the family is expected to do its job and leave the education of children to the schools. If educators view students as *children*, they are likely to see both the family and the community as partners with the school in children's education and development. Partners recognize their shared interests in and responsibilities for children, and they work together to create better programs and opportunities for students.

There are many reasons for developing school, family, and community partnerships. Partnerships can improve school programs and school climate, provide family services and support, increase parents' skills and leadership, connect families with others in the school and in the community, and help teachers with their work. However, the main reason to create such partnerships is to help all youngsters succeed in school and in later life. When parents, teachers, students, and others view one another as partners in education, a caring community forms around students and begins its work.

What do successful partnership programs look like? How can practices be effectively designed and implemented? What are the results of better communications, interactions, and exchanges across these three important contexts? These questions have challenged research and practice, creating an interdisciplinary field of inquiry into school, family, and community partnerships with "caring" as a core concept.

The field has been strengthened by supporting federal, state, and local policies. Since the late 1980s, Title I of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act has included increasingly specific, research-based mandates and guidelines for programs and practices of family and community involvement. Most recently, the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) outlines a "nested" system of school, district, and state requirements for developing research-based programs that involve parents in ways that contribute to student achievement and success in school. These guidelines must be met to qualify for and maintain federal funding.

As important, many states and districts have developed or are preparing their own policies to guide schools in creating more systematic connections with families and with community partners. The policies reflect research results and exemplary practices that show that goals for more effective programs of family and community involvement are attainable (Epstein, 2005a).

Underlying all of the policies and programs is a theory of how social organizations connect with each other; a framework of the basic components of school, family, and community partnerships for children's learning; a growing literature on positive and negative results of these connections for students, families, and schools; and an understanding of how to organize excellent programs. In this chapter, I summarize the theory, framework, and guidelines from our research that should help elementary, middle, and high schools and education leaders take steps toward successful partnerships.

Overlapping Spheres of Influence: Understanding the Theory

Schools make choices. They may conduct only a few communications and interactions with families and communities, keeping the three spheres of influence that directly affect student learning and development relatively separate. Or, they may conduct many high-quality communications and interactions designed to bring all three spheres of influence closer together. With frequent interactions among schools, families, and communities, more students will receive common messages from various people about the importance of school, of working hard, of thinking creatively, of helping one another, and of staying in school.

The *external* model of overlapping spheres of influence recognizes that the three major contexts in which students learn and grow—the family, the school, and the community—may be drawn together or pushed apart. In this model, there are some practices that schools, families, and communities conduct separately and some that they conduct jointly to influence children's learning and development.

The *internal* model of the interaction of the three spheres of influence shows where and how complex and essential interpersonal relations and patterns of influence occur between individuals at home, at school, and in the community. These social relationships may be enacted and studied at an *institutional* level (e.g., when a school invites all families to an event or sends the same communications to all families) and at an *individual* level (e.g., when a parent and a teacher meet in conference or talk by phone). Connections between educators or parents and community groups, agencies, and services also can be represented and studied within the model (Epstein, 1987, 1992, 1994).

The model of school, family, and community partnerships locates the student at the center. The inarguable fact is that students are the main actors in their education, development, and success in school. School, family, and community partnerships cannot simply “produce” successful students. Rather, partnership activities may be designed to engage, guide, energize, and motivate students to produce their own successes. The assumption is that if children feel cared for and if they are encouraged to work hard in the role of student, they are more likely to do their best to learn to read, write, calculate, and learn other skills and talents, and to remain in school.

Interestingly, studies indicate that students are crucial for the success of school, family, and community partnerships. Students are often their parents' main source of information about school. In strong partnership programs, teachers help students understand and conduct both traditional communications with families (e.g., delivering memos or report cards) and new communications (e.g., interacting with family members about homework, using e-mail to communicate with teachers, or

participating in or leading parent-teacher-student conferences). As we gain more information about the role of students in partnerships, we are developing a more complete understanding of how schools, families, and communities must work with students to increase their chances for success.

How the Theory Works in Practice

In some schools there still are educators who say, “If the family would just do its job, we could do our job.” And there still are families who say, “I raised this child; now it is your job to educate her.” These words embody a view of *separate* spheres of influence. Other educators say, “I cannot do my job without the help of my students’ families and the support of this community.” And some parents say, “I really need to know what is happening in school in order to help my child.” These phrases embody the theory of *overlapping spheres of influence*.

In a partnership, teachers and administrators create more *family-like* schools. A family-like school recognizes each child’s individuality and makes each child feel special and included. Family-like schools welcome all families, not just those that are easy to reach. In a partnership, parents create more *school-like* families. A school-like family recognizes that each child is also a student. Families reinforce the importance of school, homework, and activities that build student skills and feelings of success.

Communities, too, including groups of parents working together, create *school-like* opportunities, events, and programs that reinforce, recognize, and reward students for good progress, creativity, contributions, and excellence. Communities also create *family-like* settings, services, and events to enable families to better support their children. *Community-minded* families and students help their neighborhoods and other families. The concept of a community school or full-service school is gaining acceptance (Dryfoos & Maguire, 2002) This refers to a place where programs and services for students, parents, and others are offered before, during, and after the regular school day.

Schools and communities talk about programs and services that are family-friendly—meaning that they take into account the needs and realities of family life, are feasible to conduct, and are equitable toward all families. When all these concepts combine, children experience *learning communities* or *caring communities* (Epstein, 1995; Henderson, Mapp, Johnson, & Davies, 2007; Lewis, Schaps, & Watson, 1995).

All of these terms are consistent with the theory of overlapping spheres of influence, but they are not abstract concepts. You will find them daily in conversations, news stories, and celebrations of many kinds. In a family-like school, a teacher might say, “I know when a student is having a bad day and how to help him along.” A student might slip and call a teacher “mom” or “dad” and then laugh with a mixture of embarrassment and glee. In a school-like family, a parent might say, “I make sure my daughter knows that homework comes first.” A child might raise his hand to speak at the dinner table and then joke about acting as if he were still in school. When communities reach out to students and their families, youngsters might say, “This program really made my schoolwork make sense!” Parents or educators might comment, “This community really supports its schools.”

Once people hear about the concepts of family-like schools and school-like families, they remember positive examples of schools, teachers, and places in the community that were “like a family” to them. They may remember how a teacher paid individual attention to them, recognized their uniqueness, or praised them for real progress, just as a parent would. They might recall things at home

that were “just like school” and that supported their work as a student, or they might remember community activities that made them feel smart or good about themselves and their families. They will recall that parents, siblings, and other family members engaged in and enjoyed educational activities and took pride in the good schoolwork or homework that they did, just as a teacher would.

How Partnerships Work in Practice

These terms and examples are evidence of the *potential* for schools, families, and communities to create caring educational environments. It is possible to have a school that is excellent academically but ignores families. However, that school will build barriers between teachers, parents, and children that affect school life and learning. It is possible to have a school that is ineffective academically but involves families in many good ways. With its weak academic program, that school will shortchange students’ learning. Neither of these schools exemplifies a caring, educational environment that requires academic excellence, good communication, and productive interactions involving the school, all families, and the community.

Some children succeed in school without much family involvement or despite family neglect or distress, particularly if the school has excellent academic and support programs. Teachers, relatives outside the immediate family, other families, and members of the community may provide important guidance and encouragement for these students. As support from school, home, *and* community accumulates, more students feel secure and cared for, understand and adopt the goals of education, work to achieve their full potential, build positive attitudes and school behaviors, and stay in school. The shared interests and investments of schools, families, and communities create the conditions of caring that work to “overdetermine” the likelihood of student success (Boykin, 1994).

Any practice can be designed and implemented well or poorly. Even well-implemented partnership practices may not be useful to all families. In a caring school community, participants work continually to improve the nature and effects of partnerships. Although the interactions of educators, parents, students, and community members will not always be smooth and successful, partnership programs establish a base of respect and trust on which to build. Good partnerships encourage questions and debates, and withstand disagreements; provide structures and processes to solve problems; and are maintained—even strengthened—after conflicts and differences have been resolved. Without a firm base of partnerships, the problems and concerns about schools and students that are sure to arise will be harder to solve.

What Research Says

In surveys, experimental interventions, and other field studies involving teachers, parents, and students at the elementary, middle, and high school levels, some important patterns relating to partnerships have emerged.

- Partnerships tend to decline across the grades, *unless* schools and teachers work to develop and implement appropriate practices of partnership at each grade level.
- Affluent communities tend to have more positive family involvement, on average, *unless* schools and teachers in economically distressed communities work to build positive partnerships with their students’ families.

- Schools in more economically-depressed communities make more contacts with families about the problems and difficulties their children are having, *unless* they work at developing balanced partnership programs that also include contacts about the positive accomplishments of students.
- Single parents, parents who are employed outside the home, parents who live far from the school, and fathers are less involved, on average, at the school building, *unless* the school organizes opportunities for families to become involved and to volunteer at various times and in various places to support the school and their children. These parents may be as involved as other parents with their children at home.

Researchers from the U.S. and other nations have drawn the following conclusions from their studies of family and community involvement:

- Just about all families care about their children, want them to succeed, and are eager to obtain better information from schools and communities in order to remain good partners in their children's education.
- Just about all teachers and administrators would like to involve families, but many do not know how to efficiently and effectively build positive and productive programs, and, consequently, are fearful about trying. This creates a "rhetoric rut," in which educators are stuck expressing support for partnerships without taking necessary actions.
- Just about all students at all levels—elementary, middle, and high school—want their families to be more knowledgeable partners about schooling and are willing to take active roles in assisting communications between home and school. However, students need much better information about how their schools view partnerships and more guidance about how they can conduct important exchanges with their families about school activities, homework, and school decisions.

The summary of results reflect findings in articles and chapters by Baker and Stevenson (1986), Bauch (1988), Becker and Epstein (1982), Booth and Dunn (1996), Burch and Palanki (1994), Clark (1983), Connors & Epstein (1994), Dauber and Epstein (1993), Davies, 1991, 1993; Dornbusch and Ritter (1988), Eccles and Harold (1996), Epstein (1986, 1990, 2001, 2005c), Epstein & Connors (1994), Epstein & Dauber (1991), Epstein, Herrick, & Coates, (1996), Epstein and Lee (1995), Epstein and Sanders (2000), Lareau (1989), Lee, 1994; Sanders, (2005), Scott-Jones (1995), Sheldon (2005, 2007a, b), Sheldon & Van Voorhis, (2004), Simon (2004), Van Voorhis, 2003; and VanVoorhis & Sheldon (2004), and others.

Also see Chapter 1.3 in this *Handbook* (Sheldon, 2009) for a literature review and summary of results for students in preschools, elementary, middle, and high school of family and community involvement in reading, math, science, attendance, behavior, and transitions to new schools.

Results of studies of preschool students indicate, overwhelmingly, that family involvement boosts students reading, math, and social readiness skills (Blevins-Knabe, 2008; Dickinson & Tabors, 2001; Faires, Nichols, & Rickelman, 2000; Fantuzzi, McWayne, Perry, & Childs, 2004; Lonigan & Whitehurst, 1998; Marcon, 1999; McWayne, Campos, & Owsianik, 2008); Powell, Son, File, & San Juan, 2010; Reynolds, Temple, Robertson, & Mann, 2002; Scarborough & Dobrick, 1994; Sénéchal & Young, 2008; Waanders, Mendez, & Downer,2007).

The research results are important because they indicate that caring communities can be built intentionally; that they include families that might not become involved on their own; and that, by their own reports, just about all families, students, and teachers believe that partnerships are important for helping students succeed across the grades.

Good programs of family and community involvement will look different at each site, as individual schools tailor their practices to meet the needs and interests, time and talents, and ages and grade levels of the student. However, our studies have identified some commonalities across successful partnership programs at all grade levels. These include attention to the overlapping spheres of influence on student development; attention to various types of involvement that promote many different opportunities for schools, families, and communities to work together; and an Action Team for Partnerships (ATP) to coordinate each school's work and progress on family and community involvement. The best school-based programs are supported by district leaders for partnerships, whose expertise grows and who help all elementary, middle, and high schools in the district to plan, implement, and evaluate their programs and share best practices (Epstein, 2007).

Six Types of Involvement— Six Types of Caring

A framework of six major types of involvement is based on the results of many studies and from many years of work by educators and families in elementary, middle, and high schools. The framework (summarized in the accompanying tables) helps educators develop more comprehensive programs of school and family partnerships. The framework also helps researchers locate their questions and results in ways that can inform and improve practice (Epstein, 1992; 1995).

The six types of involvement are *parenting, communicating, volunteering, learning at home, decision making, and collaborating with the community*. Each type of involvement includes many different *practices* of partnership (see Table 1.1.1). Each type presents particular *challenges* that must be met to involve all families and needed *redefinitions* of some basic principles of involvement (see Table 1.1.2). Finally, each type is likely to lead to different *results* for students, parents, teaching practices, and school climates (see Table 1.1.3). Thus, schools must select which practices will help achieve the goals they set for student success and for creating a climate of partnerships. The tables provide examples of practices for each type of involvement, challenges for successful implementation, redefinitions for up-to-date understanding, and results that have been documented and observed in diverse school settings. (Tables attached.)

Charting the Course

The entries in the tables are illustrative. The sample practices displayed in Table 1.1.1 are a few of hundreds of activities that may be selected or designed for each type of involvement. Although all schools may use the framework of six types as a guide, each school must chart its own course in choosing practices to meet the needs of its families and students.

The challenges in Table 1.1.2 are a few of many that relate to the sample practices for each type of involvement. There are challenges—that is, problems—for every activity that must be resolved in order to reach and engage all families in the best ways. Often, when one challenge has been met, a new one will emerge.

The redefinitions, also in Table 1.1.2, redirect old notions so that involvement is not viewed solely as or measured only by “bodies in the building.” For example, the table calls for changes in how we define, organize, and conduct workshops, communications, volunteers, homework, decision making, and connections with community. By redefining these familiar terms, it is possible for partnership programs to reach out in new ways to many more families.

The selected results in Table 1.1.3 should help correct the widespread misperception that any practice that involves families will raise children’s achievement test scores. Instead, it can be seen that certain practices are more likely than others to influence students’ attitudes, attendance, and behavior in school, whereas other practices will influence skills, test scores, and other achievements, over time.

Although students are the main focus of partnerships, the various types of involvement also promote various results for parents and teachers. For example, expected results for parents include not only leadership in decision making, but also confidence about parenting, productive curriculum-related interactions with children, and many interactions with other parents and the school. The expected results for teachers include not only improved parent-teacher conferences and clearer school-home communications, but also helped teachers understand students’ families, take new approaches to homework, and make productive connections with families and the community.

The results listed in Table 1.1.3 have been measured in at least one research study and/or observed as many schools conducted their work on partnerships. The entries are listed in positive terms to indicate the results of well-designed and well-implemented practices. It should be fully understood, however, that results may be negative if poorly-designed practices exclude families or create barriers to communication and exchange. More research is needed on the results of specific practices of partnership in various schools, at various grade levels, and for diverse populations of students, families, and teachers. It will be important to confirm, extend, or correct the information on results listed in Table 1.1.3 to help schools make purposeful choices among practices that foster various types of involvement.

The tables cannot show the connections that occur when one activity promotes several types of involvement simultaneously. For example, volunteers may organize and conduct a clothing swap shop (Type 3) that allows parents obtain school uniforms or children’s clothes at no cost (Type 1), and community businesses may offer discounts on uniforms purchased at the swap-shop (Type 6). The participating parents may serve as volunteers to keep the swap shop operating, thereby perpetuating activities and results for Types 1, 3, and 6.

As another example, an after-school program may be conducted by parent and community volunteers and the community’s Parks and Recreation Department, combining Types 3 and 6. The after-school program also serves as a Type 1 activity because it assists families in supervising their children in a safe and purposeful place. The program also may alter the way homework is completed and how interactions about homework are conducted at home between students and parents (Type 4). Research is needed to understand the combination of types of involvement in complex activities. Practitioners should realize that various practices may activate several types of involvement.

The tables also simplify the influences that produce results over time. For example, the involvement of families with children in reading at home may make students more strongly motivated to read and to give more attention to reading instruction in school. This, in turn, may help students maintain or improve their daily reading skills in class and their reading report card grades. Over time, good classroom reading instruction and on-going home support should increase students’ skills and confidence in reading and significantly improve their reading achievement test scores. The time

between a Family Reading Night or other family involvement activities in reading and the time that students' increase their reading achievement test scores will vary, depending on the quality and quantity of the reading-related activities in school and out.

Consider one more example. Studies using longitudinal data and rigorous statistical controls on student background and prior influences found important benefits for high school students' attitudes, behaviors, and report card grades as a result of continuing several types of family involvement from middle school through high school (Lee, 1994; Simon, 2004). However, achievement test scores, stable by 12th grade, were not greatly affected by partnerships at the high school level. By contrast, elementary school students' math achievement test scores increased significantly when their teachers assigned interactive math homework (Van Voorhis, in press; Epstein, 2005b). Even with prior math test scores accounted for, elementary students' standardized achievement can be influenced by effective homework designs and interactions with parents. In the future, longitudinal studies of practical interventions at different grade levels will increase an understanding of the complex patterns of results that can develop from various partnership activities (Epstein, 1991; Epstein & Dauber, 1995; Epstein & Sanders, 2000; Henderson and Mapp, 2007; and see article 1.3 on results in this chapter).

The six types of involvement guide the development of a balanced, comprehensive program of partnerships, including opportunities for family involvement at school, at home, and in the community, with potentially important results for students, parents, and teachers. The results will depend on the particular activities that are implemented and the quality of the design, implementation, and outreach.

Action Teams for Partnerships

Who will work to create caring school communities that are based on concepts of partnership? How will the necessary work on all six types of involvement get done? Although a principal or a teacher may be a leader in working with some families and with some community groups, one person cannot create a lasting, comprehensive program that involves all families as their children progress through the grades.

From the hard work of many educators and families in hundreds of schools and districts, we have learned that, along with clear policies and strong support from district and state leaders and from school principals, an Action Team for Partnerships (ATP) in each school is an essential structure. The ATP – a committee of the School Council or School Improvement Team – is dedicated to improving plans and practices of family and community involvement. The ATP guides the development of a comprehensive partnership program linked to school improvement goals for student success. Using the framework of six types of involvement, the ATP integrates all family and community connections that occur in the school in a single, unified plan and program.

The trials and errors and the efforts and insights of hundreds of schools across the country have helped identify five important steps that any school can take to develop more positive school, family, and community connections.

Step 1: Create an Action Team for Partnerships

A team approach is an appropriate and effective way to build school, family, and community partnerships. The Action Team for Partnerships (ATP) is an “action arm” of a School Council or School Improvement Team, if one exists in the school. The ATP takes responsibility for assessing present family and community involvement practices, organizing options for new partnerships, implementing selected activities, delegating leadership for other activities, evaluating next steps, and continuing to improve and coordinate practices for all six types of involvement. Although the members of the ATP lead some of activities, they are assisted by other teachers, parents, students, administrators, and community members who take leadership or support roles for planned partnerships.

The ATP team should include at least two or three teachers from different grade levels, departments, or specialties; at least two or three parents from different neighborhoods or cultural groups with children in different grade levels; and at least one administrator. Teams may also include at least one member from the community at large and, at the high school level, at least two students from different grade levels. Others who are central to the school’s work with families also may be included as team members, such as a school counselor, social worker, nurse, school psychologist, cafeteria worker, secretary, or custodian. Such diverse membership ensures that the team will plan activities that take into account the various needs, interests, and talents of teachers, parents, the school, and students.

The chair (or, better, co-chairs) of the action team should be members who have the respect of the other members, as well as good communication skills and an understanding of the partnership approach. At least one member of the action team should also serve on the School Council, School Improvement Team, or other advisory body.

Members of the ATP may serve as chair or co-chairs of subcommittees organized to implement family and community involvement activities on specific school improvement goals (e.g., family and community involvement to help improve students’ reading, math, and behavior, and to improve the school’s climate of partnerships) or on the six types of involvement. A team with at least six members (or as many as 12 or more) ensures that responsibilities for leadership can be shared and delegated so that one person is not overburdened with all family and community involvement activities. The work of the action team also ensures that plans for partnership will continue even if members move or change schools or positions. Members may serve renewable terms of two to three years, with the replacement of members who leave in the interim. Other thoughtful variations in assignments and activities may be created by small or large schools using this process. See Chapter 3 for details on organizing effective Action Teams for Partnerships.

In the first phase of our field work in 1987, projects were led by “project directors” (usually teachers) and were focused on one type of involvement at a time. Some schools succeeded in developing good partnerships over several years, but others were thwarted if the project director moved, if the principal changed, or if the project grew larger than one person could handle. Other schools were guided to try a team approach to work on many types of involvement simultaneously, and to focus on activities that create a climate of partnerships and that help students reach important results in learning and behavior. These schools showed that the team approach was the best structure for strong and sustainable program. Now, a team approach guides all of our research and development projects in elementary, middle, and high schools.

Step 2: Obtain Funds and Other Support

A modest budget is needed to guide and support the activities planned by each school's Action Team for Partnerships. Funds also are needed for district leaders for partnerships who will help each school with its plans and programs of family and community involvement. Investments are needed at the state level for leadership on partnerships, as well.

Funds for schools, districts, and states may come from a number of sources. These include federal, state, and local programs that mandate, request, or support family involvement, including Title I and other "titled" funding streams. At the district level, funds are needed to support the salaries of a director and facilitators who help all schools develop their partnership programs, and for program costs (e.g., staff development and training workshops on school, family, and community partnerships; parent coordinators or liaisons to serve as ATP chairs or co-chairs; activities in schools' One-Year Action Plans for Partnerships). In addition, local school-business partnerships, school discretionary funds, and fundraising targeted to the schools' partnership programs can support the plans and activities of school-based ATPs. Recent data indicate that schools' ATPs need at least \$2500 per year to support activities in a typical, start-up Action Plan for Partnerships. See details on levels and sources of funds for partnership programs at the school, district, and state levels in Chapter 7.

The ATP also must have sufficient time and social support to do its work. This requires explicit support from the principal and from district leaders for team-training, meetings to plan and evaluate activities, and time to conduct the activities in the annual plan for partnerships. Time during the summer also may be used to plan new approaches and projects for the start of the new school year.

Step 3: Identify Starting Points

Most schools have some teachers and administrators who conduct some practices of partnership with some families some of the time. How can good practices be organized and extended so that all teachers at all grade levels inform and involve all families in ways that support student learning and success in school? How can some school-wide involvement activities build a sense of community with all students and families?

The Action Team for Partnerships (ATP) works to systematize and improve typically haphazard patterns of involvement. The ATP starts by gathering information about the school's current practices of partnership, along with the views, experiences, and wishes of teachers, parents, administrators, and students. See *Starting Points* (pp. xx-yy and CD) and *Measure of School, Family, and Community Partnerships* (pp. xx-yy and CD) for two ways of assessing the nature and extent of present practices.

Starting points also may be identified in other ways, depending on available resources, time, and talents. For example, the ATP might use formal questionnaires (Epstein & Salinas, 1993; Epstein, Connors, & Salinas, 1993; Sheldon & Epstein, 2007) or telephone interviews to survey teachers, administrators, parents, and students, if funds and experts are available to process, analyze, and report survey data. Or, the ATP might organize a panel of teachers, parents, and students to speak at a PTA or PTO meeting to discuss the goals and desired activities for improving family and community involvement. Structured discussions may be conducted at a series of principal's breakfasts for representative groups of teachers, parents, students, and others; random-sample phone calls may also be used to collect suggestions and reactions; and formal focus groups may be convened to gather ideas about school, family, and community partnerships at the school.

What questions should be addressed to take stock of present practices and to plan next steps? Regardless of how information is gathered, the following areas should be part of any information gathering:

- *Present strengths.* Which practices of school, family, and community partnerships are, presently, working well for the school as a whole? For individual teachers and specific grade levels? For which types of involvement? On what school goals for student success?
- *Needed changes.* Ideally, how do we want school, family, and community partnerships to work at this school three years from now? Which present practices should continue and which should change? To reach school goals, what new practices are needed for each of the major types of involvement?
- *Expectations.* What do teachers expect of families? What do families expect of teachers and other school personnel? What do students expect their families to do to help them negotiate school life? What do students expect their teachers to do to keep their families informed and involved?
- *Sense of community.* Which families are presently involved, and which are not yet engaged with the school and with their children's education? Who are the "hard-to-reach" families? What might be done to communicate with and engage these families? Are current partnership practices coordinated to integrate all families as a school community? Or, are families whose children receive special services (e.g., Title I, special education, bilingual education) separated from other families?
- *Links to goals.* How are students doing on measures of academic achievement, including test scores and report card grades? On measures of attitudes and attendance? On other indicators of success? How might family and community connections assist the school in helping more students reach higher goals and achieve greater success? Which practices of school, family, and community partnerships could contribute to the attainment of particular goals?

Step 4: Develop a One-Year Action Plan

With the information on a school's starting points and with understanding of the goals and ideas for partnerships collected from teachers, administrators, parents, and students, the Action Team for Partnerships (ATP) will develop a detailed One-Year Action Plan for Partnerships (see Chapters 4 and 5). The annual action plan includes a set of selected goals or objectives, desired results, measures to assess results, specific involvement activities that will be implemented, improved, or maintained each year; dates scheduled; types of involvement; actions needed to prepare the activity; people responsible for implementing the activities and those assisting; funds or resources required; and other important details.

The One-Year Action Plan for Partnerships should be shared with the School Council or School Improvement Team, parent organization, all teachers, and, in various ways, with all parents and students. Corrections and additions from the various groups contribute to a final plan for partnerships for the school year.

If the ATP takes one step forward each year to improve family and community involvement for each of the specific academic and behavioral goals in the One-Year Action Plan, it will continually

improve the quality of partnerships and student success. If the ATP makes one step forward each year on each of the six types of involvement, it will take 18 steps forward over three years to improve the school climate for partnerships. Good plans and actions lead to a more comprehensive, coordinated, and goal-oriented program of school, family, and community partnerships.

In short, the ATP, with input from others, will complete an annual, detailed action plan for partnerships that addresses these issues:

- *Details.* What will be done each year to implement activities that involve families in ways linked to specific goals for student success? What activities for the six types of involvement will be activated? How will these activities also create a welcoming school climate for all students and their families? What, specifically, will be accomplished over the next school year to improve family and community involvement?
- *Responsibilities.* Who will be responsible for developing and implementing the practices of partnership that are in the One-Year Action Plan for Partnerships? Will staff development or other guidance be needed to plan and implement activities? How will teachers, administrators, parents, and students be supported and recognized for their work? What role will district leaders for partnership or others play in assisting schools ATPs with activities?
- *Costs.* What costs are associated with implementing the planned activities? What sources will provide the needed funds? Will small grants or other special budgets be needed? What funds and in-kind contributions are needed to maintain and improve the activities from year to year?
- *Evaluation.* How well are activities implemented? What are the effects of each activity on the school climate and/or on students, teachers, and families? What indicators will be used to measure the quality of implementation and the results?

Step 5: Continue Planning, Evaluating, and Improving Programs

The ATP should schedule an annual presentation and celebration of progress at the school so that all teachers, families, and students know about the work that was done each year to build partnerships. Or, a district coordinator for school, family, and community partnerships may arrange an annual mid-year or end-of-year conference for all schools in the district. At a district-wide annual meeting, ATPs from all schools can display and share their accomplishments and best practices for involving families and the community in ways that improve students' attitudes, behaviors, and achievements in specific subjects. Panels of ATP members may discuss serious challenges and solutions for reaching all families, share ideas for the six types of involvement, and gather ideas for improving programs in the next school year.

In short, the ATP considers the following questions: How will the ATP increase the number of families who are partners with the school in their children's education over the next school year? What opportunities will be arranged for teachers, parents, and students to come together with individual teachers, grade levels, or as a whole school to support student learning and development? How will the ATP evaluate, strengthen, and sustain the school's partnership program to continue to improve results for students?

Each year, the Action Team for Partnerships develops a new and improved One-Year Action Plan for Partnerships for the next school year. The ATP shares its plans and gathers input so that educators, families, students, and the community are aware of progress, new plans, and how they can help.

Characteristics of Successful Programs

Hundreds of schools have taken these five steps over the years. Their experiences helped identify some important properties of successful partnership programs.

Incremental Progress

Progress on partnerships is incremental, including more families each year in ways that benefit more students. Like reading or math programs, assessment programs, sports programs, or other school investments, partnership programs take time to develop, and must be periodically reviewed, evaluated, and continuously improved. Schools and districts in our projects have shown that some progress can be made immediately, but it tends to take at least three years to demonstrate that a partnership program is a “permanent” component of school and district organization.

The development of an excellent partnership program is a process, not a single event. All teachers, families, students, and community groups are unlikely to participate all at once. Not all activities that are implemented the first time will succeed in engaging all families. But with good planning, thoughtful implementation, well-designed activities, thoughtful evaluations, and pointed improvements, more and more families and teachers can learn to work with one another on behalf of the children they share.

Similarly, not all students instantly improve their attitudes or achievements when their families become involved in their education. After all, student learning depends mainly on good curricula, engaging and appropriate instruction, the students’ interests and commitment, and the work the students’ complete. However, with a well-implemented program of partnerships, more students receive support from their families and more will be motivated to work harder in school.

Connections to Curricular and Instructional Reform

A program of school, family, and community partnerships that focuses on children’s learning and development is an important component of curricular and instructional reform. For example, helping families understand, monitor, and interact with students on homework is an extension of classroom instruction. Volunteers who bolster and broaden student skills, talents, and interests extends classroom learning. Improving the content and conduct of parent-teacher-student conferences and goal-setting activities are important aspects of curricular reform; family support and family understanding of child and adolescent development and school curricula are necessary to assist students as learners. All of these activities – homework-help interventions, volunteers and tutors linked to student learning, the redesign of parent-teacher-student conferences, and similar activities are part of curricular and instructional reform and should be supported with the appropriate federal, state, and local funds for school improvement.

One important new direction for partnership programs connects family and community involvement directly to the School Improvement Plan. This is done by focusing family and community involvement on specific curricular and instructional goals for student learning and by appending the One-Year Action Plan for Partnerships to the annual School Improvement Plan. These organizational changes move partnerships from being peripheral and unplanned activities for parents to being official components of a school’s program for student learning and development.

Redefining Professional Development and Shared Leadership

The action team approach to partnerships changes the definition of “professional development” because teachers, administrators, parents, and other partners are trained together, as a team, to develop, implement, evaluate, and continue to improve practices of partnership. The development of a well-functioning Action Team for Partnerships is not the result of a “dose” of inservice education, but is a long term process of developing and extending educators’ and parents’ talents and capacities for organizing and conducting effective partnerships. Teachers, administrators, parents, and others on the Action Team for Partnerships must be helped to become the experts on this topic for their school. With this definition, program development can be supported by various federal, state, and local funds for professional development for school improvement.

An effective program of family and community involvement also stretches the definition of “shared leadership” – an important concept in educational administration. Usually, the term means that teachers will share leadership with principals and specialists in improving school organization, curriculum, and instruction. In effective partnership programs, shared leadership means that all members on the team of teachers, administrators, parents, and community partners will take responsibility for developing, implementing, evaluating, and continually improving plans and practices of family and community involvement.

Developing excellent partnership programs in all districts and schools would be easier if educators came to their positions prepared to work productively with families and communities. Courses or classes are needed in preservice teacher education, continuing studies, and advanced degree programs that define professional work in terms of partnerships. Today, most teachers, principals, counselors, and district leaders enter their professions without an understanding of family backgrounds, concepts of caring, the framework of six types of involvement, or partnership program development. Thus, most principals and district leaders are not prepared to guide school teams in developing, evaluating, and sustaining effective partnership programs.

Schools, colleges, and departments of education that prepare future teachers, administrators, and others who work with children and families should identify where in the curriculum students are asked to study and learn the theory, research, policy, and practical ideas of partnerships, or where these topics should be added to better prepare their graduates for their professional work (Chavkin & Williams, 1988;

Epstein, 2001; Epstein & Sheldon, 2006; Hinz, Clark, & Nathan, 1992; Christenson & Conoley, 1992; Swap, 1993).

Even with improved preservice and advanced coursework, however, each school’s Action Team for Partnerships and other practicing educators will need inservice education and targeted team training to tailor plans for partnerships to the needs and goals of the teachers, families, and students in the school. The framework and guidelines in this chapter can be used by thoughtful educators to organize high-quality, on-going professional development on partnerships, school by school.

The Core of Caring

Years ago, a school in Baltimore named its partnership program the *I Care Program*. It developed an *I Care Parent Club* that fostered fellowship and leadership of families, an *I Care Newsletter*, and many other events and activities. Other schools also gave catchy, positive names to their programs to indicate that families, students, teachers, and community partners were developing relationships and conducting actions to assist all students toward success.

Interestingly, synonyms for “caring” match the six types of involvement:

Type 1—Parenting: **Supporting, nurturing, loving, and child raising**

Type 2—Communicating: **Relating, reviewing, and overseeing**

Type 3—Volunteering: **Supervising and fostering**

Type 4—Learning at Home: **Managing, recognizing, and rewarding**

Type 5—Decision Making: **Contributing, considering, and judging**

Type 6—Collaborating with the Community: **Sharing and giving**

Underlying all six types of involvement are two defining synonyms of caring: trusting and respecting. Of course, the varied meanings are interconnected, but it is striking that various elements of caring are associated with activities for the six types of involvement. If all six types of involvement are operating well in a school’s program of partnerships, then all of these caring behaviors could be activated to assist children’s learning and development.

Summary: Battleground or Homeland?

Despite real progress in many states, districts, and schools over the past few years, there still are too many schools where educators do not understand the families of their students. There still are too many families who do not understand their children’s schools, and too many communities that do not understand or assist their schools, families, or students. There still are too many districts and states without the policies, departments, leadership, staff, and fiscal support needed to help all schools develop excellent and permanent programs of partnership.

Relatively small financial investments are needed to support district leaders for partnerships and the work of school-based Action Teams for Partnerships. Yet, those investments yield significant returns for all schools, teachers, families, and students. Educators who have led the way in constructing research-based programs with the necessary components provide evidence that any state, district, or school can create similar programs.

Schools have choices. There are two opposing approaches to involving families in schools and in their children’s education. One approach emphasizes conflict and views the school as a battleground. The conditions and relationships in this kind of environment guarantee power struggles and disharmony. The other approach emphasizes partnership and views the school as a homeland. The conditions and relationships in this kind of environment invite mutual respect, shared leadership on partnerships, and direct energies to activities that foster student learning and development. Even when conflicts flare, however, peace must be restored, and the partners in children’s education must work together.

Next Steps: Strengthening Partnerships

Collaborative work and thoughtful give-and-take among researchers, policy leaders, educators, parents, and community partners are responsible for the progress that has been made over the past two decades in understanding and developing school, family, and community partnerships. Similar collaborations will be important for future progress in this and other areas of school reform.

To promote these approaches, I established the National Network of Partnership Schools (NNPS) at Johns Hopkins University in 1996. NNPS provides school, district, state, and other education leaders with research-based tools and guidelines to help elementary, middle, and high schools plan, implement, and maintain comprehensive and goal-oriented programs of school, family, and community partnerships.

With the efforts of many colleagues, many of whom are co-authors of this *Handbook*, NNPS has been able to encourage and guide educators, parents, and other community leaders to organize stronger program of family and community involvement.

Partnership schools, districts, and states have worked hard to put the recommendations of this chapter into practice in ways that are appropriate for their locations. Implementation includes applying the theory of overlapping spheres of influence, the framework of six types of involvement, and the action team approach. Systemic advances include district leaders who assist all schools to use teamwork and develop and sustain partnership programs. The researchers and staff of NNPS at Johns Hopkins University disseminate information, guidelines, and newsletters; offer e-mail and website assistance; hold annual conferences; and conduct workshops to help state and district coordinators and school leaders learn new strategies and share successful ideas. The members of NNPS share best practices at all policy levels in annual collections of *Promising Partnership Practices* (Maushard et al., 2007). With a strong research base, NNPS guides state and district leaders, educators, and parents to recognize their common interests in the children they share, and to work together, with care, to strengthen programs of family and community involvement that contribute to student success.

Notes

The first version of this article appeared in *Phi Delta Kappan*, 1995, 76(9), 701-712.

The new version has been updated with recent research and knowledge gained by working with more than one thousand schools, one hundred-fifty districts, and many states and organizations in the National Network of Partnership Schools (NNPS) at Johns Hopkins University. See the section on Success Stories on the NNPS website at www.partnershipschoools.org.

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TABLE 1.1.1 Epstein’s Framework of Six types of Involvement for Comprehensive Programs of Partnership and Sample Practices

Type 1 Parenting	Type 2 Communicating	Type 3 Volunteering	Type 4 Learning at Home	Type 5 Decision Making	Type 6 Collaborating With the Community
Help all families establish home environments to support children as students	Design effective forms of school-to-home and home-to-school communications about school programs and their children’s progress	Recruit and organize parent help and support	Provide information and ideas to families about how to help students at home with homework and other curriculum-related activities, decisions, and planning	Include parents in school decisions, developing parent leaders and representatives	Identify and integrate resources and services from the community to strengthen school programs, family practices, and student learning and development

[MORE]

Table 1.1.1 continued

SAMPLE PRACTICES					
Suggestions for home conditions that support learning at each grade level	Conferences with every parent at least once a year, with follow-ups as needed	School and classroom volunteer program to help teachers, administrators, students, and other parents	Information for families on knowledge and skills required for students in all subjects at each grade	Active PTA/PTO or other parent organizations, advisory councils, or committees (e.g., curriculum, safety, personnel)	Information for students and families on community health, cultural, recreational, social support, and other programs or services
Workshops, video tapes, computerized phone messages on parenting for each age and grade level	Language translators assist families, as needed	Parent room or family center for volunteer work, meetings, resources for families	Information on homework policies and how to monitor and discuss schoolwork at home	for parent leadership and participation	Information on community activities that link to learning skills and talents, including summer programs for students
Parent education and other courses or training for parents (e.g., GED, college credit, family literacy)	Weekly or monthly folders of student work sent home for review and comments	Annual postcard survey to identify all available talents, times, and locations of volunteers	Information on how to assist students to improve skills on various class and school assessments	Independent advocacy groups to lobby and work for school reform and improvements	Service integration through partnerships involving school; civic, counseling, cultural, health, recreation, and other agencies and organizations; and businesses
Family support programs to assist families with health, nutrition, and other services	Parent-student pick-up of report cards, with conferences on improving grades	Class parent, telephone tree, or other structures to provide all families with needed information	Regular schedule of homework that requires students to discuss and interact with families on what they are learning in class	District-level councils and committees for family and community involvement	Service to the community by students, families, and schools (e.g., recycling, art, music, drama, and other activities for seniors or others)
Home visits at transition points to preschool, elementary, middle, and high school; neighborhood meetings to help families understand schools and to help schools understand families.	Regular schedule of useful notices, memos, phone calls, newsletters, information on the school website, and other communications	Parent patrols or other activities to aid safety and operation of school programs	Calendars with activities for parents and students to do at home or in the community	Information on school or local elections for school representatives	Participation of alumni in school programs for students and as mentors for planning for college and work.
	Clear information on choosing schools or courses, programs, and activities within schools			Networks to link all families with parent representatives	
	Clear information on all school policies, programs, reforms, and transitions				
	Information for parents on Internet safety				
			Family math, science, and reading activities at school		
			Summer learning packets or activities		
			Family participation in setting student goals each year and in planning for college or work		

TABLE 1.1.2 Challenges and Redefinitions for the Successful Design and Implementation of the Six Types of Involvement

CHALLENGES					
Type 1 Parenting	Type 2 Communicating	Type 3 Volunteering	Type 4 Learning at Home	Type 5 Decision Making	Type 6 Collaborating With the Community
Provide information to all families who want it or who need it, not just to the few who can attend workshops or meetings at the school building	Review the readability, clarity, form, and frequency of all memos, notices, and other print and non-print communications	Recruit volunteers widely so that <i>all</i> families know that their time and talents are welcome	Design and organize a regular schedule of interactive homework (e.g., weekly or bimonthly) that gives <i>students</i> responsibility for discussing important things they are learning, and helps families stay aware of the content of their children's classwork	Include parent leaders from all racial, ethnic, socioeconomic, and other groups in the school	Solve turf problems of responsibilities, funds, staff, and locations for collaborative activities
Enable families to share information about culture, background, children's talents and needs	Consider parents who do not speak English well, do not read well, or need large type	Make flexible schedules for volunteers, assemblies, and events to enable employed parents to participate	Coordinate family-linked homework activities, if students have several teachers	Offer training to enable leaders to serve as representatives of other families, with input from and return of information to all parents	Inform families of community programs for students, such as mentoring, tutoring, and business partnerships
Make sure that all information for families is clear, usable, and linked to children's success in school	Review the quality of major communications (e.g., the schedule, content, and structure of conferences; newsletters; report cards; and others)	Organize volunteer work; provide training; match time and talent with school, teacher, and student needs; and recognize efforts so that participants are productive	Involve families with their children in all important curriculum-related decisions	Include students (along with parents) in decision-making groups	Assure equity of opportunities for students and families to participate in community programs or to obtain services
	Establish clear two-way channels for communications from home to school and from school to home		Provide timely information to students and families on credits required for high school graduation, credits earned, and steps for planning postsecondary education		Match community contributions with school goals; integrate child and family services with education

[MORE]

Table 1.1.2 continued.

REDEFINITIONS

<p>"Workshop" to mean more than a meeting about a topic held at the school building at a particular time; "workshop" also may mean making information about a topic available in a variety of forms that can be viewed, heard, or read anywhere, anytime</p>	<p>"Communications about school programs and student progress" to mean: two-way, three-way, and many-way channels of communication that connect schools, families, students, and the community</p>	<p>"Volunteer" to mean any one who supports school programs and students' activities in any way, at any place, and at any time—not just during the school day and at the school building—and those who are audiences for student events, sports, activities, and performances</p>	<p>"Homework" to mean not only work done alone, but also interactive activities shared with others at home or in the community, linking schoolwork to real life "Help" at home to mean encouraging, listening, reacting, praising, guiding, monitoring, and discussing – not "teaching" school subjects</p>	<p>"Decision making" to mean a process of partnership, of shared views and actions toward shared goals, not a power struggle between conflicting ideas "Parent leader" to mean a real representative, with opportunities and support to hear from and communicate with other families</p>	<p>"Community" to mean not only the neighborhoods where students' homes and schools are located but also neighborhoods that influence student learning and development "Community" rated not only by low or high social or economic qualities, but also by strengths and talents to support students, families, and schools "Community" means all who are interested in and affected by the quality of education, not just families with children in the schools</p>
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TABLE 1.1.3 Expected Results for Students, Parents, and Teachers of the Six Types of Involvement

RESULTS FOR STUDENTS					
Type 1 Parenting	Type 2 Communicating	Type 3 Volunteering	Type 4 Learning at Home	Type 5 Decision Making	Type 6 Collaborating With the Community
Awareness of family supervision; respect for parents	Awareness of own progress and of actions needed to maintain or improve grades	Skill in communicating with adults	Gains in skills, abilities, and test scores linked to homework and classwork	Awareness of representation of families in school decisions	Increased skills and talents through enriched curricular and extracurricular experiences
Positive personal qualities, habits, beliefs, and values, as taught by family	Understanding of school policies on behavior, attendance, and other areas of student conduct	Increased learning of skills that receive tutoring or targeted attention from volunteers	Homework completion	Understanding that student rights are protected	Awareness of careers and options for future education and work
Balance between time spent on chores, on other activities, and on homework	Informed decisions about courses and programs	Awareness of many skills, talents, occupations, and contributions of parents and other volunteers	Positive attitude toward schoolwork	Specific benefits linked to policies enacted by parent organizations and experienced by students	Specific benefits linked to programs, services, resources, and opportunities that connect students with community
Good or improved attendance	Awareness of own role in partnerships, serving as courier and communicator		View of parent as more similar to teacher, and home as more similar to school		
Awareness of importance of school			Self-concept of ability as learner		

[MORE]

TABLE 1.1.3 continued

RESULTS FOR PARENTS

Understanding of and confidence about parenting, child and adolescent development, and changes in home conditions for learning as children proceed through school	Understanding school programs and policies Monitoring and awareness of student progress Responding effectively to student problems Interactions with teachers and ease of communications with school and teachers	Understanding teacher's job, increased comfort in school, and carry-over of school activities at home Self-confidence about ability to work in school and with children, or to take steps to improve own education Awareness that families are welcome and valued at school Gains in specific skills of volunteer work	Know how to support, encourage, and help student at home each year Discussions of school, classwork, and homework Understanding of instructional program each year and of what child is learning in each subject Appreciation of teaching skills Awareness of child as a learner	Input into policies that affect child's education Feeling of ownership of school Awareness of parents' voices in school decisions Shared experiences and connections with other families Awareness of school, district, and state policies	Knowledge and use of local resources by family and child to increase skills and talents, or to obtain needed services Interactions with other families in community activities Awareness of school's role in the community, and of community's contributions to the school
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RESULTS FOR TEACHERS

Understanding families' backgrounds, cultures, concerns, goals, needs, and views of their children	Increased diversity and use of communications with families and awareness of own ability to communicate clearly	Readiness to involve families in new ways, including those who do not volunteer at school Awareness of parent talents and interests in school and children	Better design of homework assignments Respect of family time Recognition of equal helpfulness of single parent, dual income, and less formally educated families in motivating and reinforcing student learning Satisfaction with family involvement and support	Awareness of parent perspectives as a factor in policy development and decisions View of equal status of family representatives on committees and in leadership roles	Awareness of community resources to enrich curriculum and instruction Openness to and skill in using mentors, business partners, community volunteers, and others to assist students and augment teaching practice Knowledgeable, helpful referrals of children and families to needed services
Respect for families' strengths and efforts	Appreciation and use of parent network for communications				
Understanding of student diversity	Increased ability to elicit and understand family views on children's programs and progress	Greater individual attention to students, with help from volunteers			
Awareness of own skills to share information on child development					