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Parent Involvement in Urban Schools

The View from the Front of the Classroom

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American educational reform movements focus on efforts to restructure our schools to include all interested parties, especially parents, in the decision-making process. Nowhere is involvement more crucial than in America's inner-city urban neighborhoods. As parents are given a greater voice in their child's school, educators must join them as collaborators. This article identifies elements that impeded parental involvement and recognizes positive and encouraging techniques leading toward successful family-school-community partnerships. An alliance between groups too long seen as opponents rather than proponents must be established.

> The trouble with schools today is not that teachers and parents don't care anymore. Caring is as intense, perhaps more intense, than ever. The trouble is that there is not enough focus on the needs of the adults, within and beyond the school walls, who must work together in order for schooling to succeed. Education is a very human partnership depending on how teachers and parents relate to each other and meet each others' adult needs. Overcoming obstacles will result in a team created to help our children achieve and isn't that the primary objective?
> — Dorothy Rich, *Megaskills*

Urban Schools in the 1990s

Current literature and research in education underscore the importance that parent participation and involvement play in a child's academic progress and successful educational experience. The importance of involvement has been traced through all educational levels from preschool through high school and in American and foreign academic settings.

American educational reform movements focus on efforts to restructure our schools to include all interested parties in the decision-making process. The collaborative model suggested by Ira Gordon, in which all parties band together

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to achieve educational excellence, has been continually cited as a path to reform in the urban school.[1] Crucial to this restructuring is an active parental component. If schools are to overcome the crisis of public confidence, they must work with the community, including its citizens and business members, to meet the unique individual needs of their setting.

Nowhere is this involvement more crucial than in America's inner-city urban neighborhoods. However, here is where we have seen minimal parent-school contact. The studies presented in this article explored parental involvement practices in multiracial, multiethnic inner-city school settings and attempted to identify and analyze the various barriers that prevent a more involved role for our inner-city parents. Data were gathered in both public and parochial settings. Studies conducted in inner-city schools in Washington, D.C., by such noted educators as Dorothy Rich and Phyllis Hobson traced academic growth by racially diverse inner-city students when parent training and involvement practices were initiated. Dr. James Comer and his colleagues at the Yale University Child Study Clinic worked with educators in the New Haven public schools in establishing a multiservice parent/child support network within targeted elementary schools. Their interventions have provided documentation that increased parent involvement and staff support does improve children's scores on standardized tests and increases rates of attendance. James Coleman and Thomas Hoffer, in *Public and Private High Schools: The Impact of Communities,* found that students in Catholic high schools performed better than students from comparable backgrounds in public high schools.[2] They speculate that the important component is the relationship of the school to the community it serves.

With studies such as these documenting the importance of parental involvement, the aim of this research was to determine and examine the actual barriers that exist within our parental population and to use these data to alter our current involvement practices, expand the types of involvement we require, and establish an awareness of the need to recognize the diversity of our students and their families.

The knowledge gained by these studies is vital in establishing successful involvement programs in the school. Educators and administrators gained insight and awareness that allowed them to design diverse yet positive experiences for these inner-city parents. Attendance at school functions increased dramatically when parental survey responses were used as a basis for planning and development.

With this knowledge and experience it is suggested that studies such as these can be of great use and significance to other educators sensitive enough to be aware that we must know our school community intimately in order to unite in the fight to offer our children a quality education. Such knowledge will avoid "blaming" each other for weaknesses and develop a realization that it is only in partnership, in working together, that we will begin to redefine and restructure our dated educational establishment.

An analysis of parent involvement practices both in the home and in the school supports the goals of effective school research and current literature in the field. An awareness of parent needs by the school prior to program design is suggested by Comer and his colleagues in their New Haven project. In addition, Sara Lightfoot states, "Our visions of family-school relationships would be substantially transformed if researchers and educational practitioners would begin to recognize the powerful and critical role of *family as educator.* . . . Children seem to learn and grow in

schools where parents and teachers share similar visions and collaborate on guiding children forward."[3]

American society and American education are facing a period of reevaluation and transition as a result of the rapid growth patterns and demands of the computer/ technological age. No other period in our nation's history has seen such profound changes affecting every aspect of our lives. The last thirty years have changed our social and economic patterns so radically that mainstream America, and even more important, those not in mainstream society are faced with challenges, responsibilities, and decisions that will set the pattern for their futures, which they must be equipped to handle intelligently.

Despite these changes, American education today reflects practices in place since Horace Mann. Relatively little has changed in terms of school calendar, curriculum, school governance, and structure. The conflict between the traditional school model and the socioeconomic demands on American families in 1992 is most evident in the growing dissatisfaction in educational standards, illiteracy rates, and high drop-out rates in our urban schools and the criticisms voiced by industry in the quality of their workforce. Consequently, school administration, parents, and industry are involved in heated debates centered on targeting weaknesses, evaluating programs, and designing appropriate reform measures.

Schools argue that they cannot do it all. Besides setting curriculum requirements, they perform duties including providing transportation, meals, health programs, day care, and social and support services. With limited time and resources, educators resist and resent taking on additional responsibilities.

Industry complains that the emerging workforce is not adequately prepared for the world of work as it existed in 1992. Prior to the onset of the technological age, all citizens were able to provide for family needs regardless of educational attainment. There existed a wealth of jobs in industrial and service occupations. However, the jobs today require employees who are literate, able to solve problems, and adaptable to the rapidly expanding computer-related job requirements. Consequently, they are forced, at great expense, to provide educational and often remedial programs for their workforce.

Parents are caught in the eye of this storm. Socioeconomic demands, changing family structures, the single-parent family, the rise in divorce rates, and the rapidly evolving standards of national and local mores have all had a tremendous impact on our children. Obviously, the children need more emotional and educational support than they are currently receiving, but programs are expensive and schools are increasingly reluctant to assume what they perceive to be parental responsibilities.

Instead of working at cross purposes and pointing the finger of blame, parents and schools must realize that they must develop working partnerships in order to provide mutual support and assistance. There exists a wealth of literature in this area, and with current trends of school reform targeting a model of school-based management involving parents and schools, educators would be well advised to become familiar with authors and organizations supporting these alliances.

Educators such as James Comer, Dorothy Rich, Joyce Epstein, and Ira Gordon have long advocated the cooperation of parents and educators as a means of educational reform. Organizations such as the PTA, the National Committee for Citizens in Education, and the Home and School Institute offer resources to both parents and schools that value this partnership. Joyce Epstein, noted researcher of parental

involvement practices, perhaps says it best: "If schools had to choose only one policy to stress, these results suggest that the most payoff for the most parents comes from teachers involving parents in helping their children learn at home."[4]

Parental Involvement as an Avenue for Change

The research is clear. Parental involvement in a child's early educational experiences will have a positive effect on the child's achievement. Schools, especially urban schools, must become aware of this connection and then take steps to assure that such involvement can happen. The literature tells us that there is a correlation between economic and educational levels and parental involvement. This is probably not difficult to rationalize. In urban schools we are dealing with a population of families that are not stereotypically middle class. Our families come from diverse backgrounds. They encompass differences in racial, ethnic, economic, and cultural environments, yet they all converge on the urban school with the dream of education as a means to success.

Attention must be paid to the expectations of our citizenship and the reality of what we are able to do with the available resources. The problems of education are not just those of the school but a reflection of the problems of the surrounding community, the city, the state, and the country as a whole. Support for educational programs must come from all areas concerned, because we all will be affected by its shortcomings.

With these factors in mind, the literature presents us with a framework for establishing an involvement program that deals with the realities of the issue and developing programs that serve the needs of educators.

The late Ira Gordon, a prolific writer, was one of the most notable authors on this subject. Gordon presents us with models for parental involvement. His assumption is that the "behavior of parents and other family members influences child learning."[5] Gordon suggested four models of parental involvement to best meet the needs of both parents and children. These include the Parent Impact Model, designed to improve the family's capabilities to provide a nurturing learning environment in the home; the Comprehensive Services Model, which suggests providing nutritional, social, psychological, and health services within the school structure; the School Impact Model, which emphasizes communication and interaction between the home and the school; and the Community Impact Model, which underscores the belief that everything in the child's life relates to his or her education and that all agencies must join to meet these needs.[6] These suggestions are related to Gordon's belief that three sets of factors influence intellectual behavior and personality development. These are demographic factors, cognitive factors, and emotional factors.[7] He feels that through the suggested service models schools will best be able to provide programs that support and nurture young learners.

Much of the research in parental involvement can be related to the theories of Ira Gordon. Researchers such as Dorothy Rich and James Comer have drawn on his models for involvement. Dorothy Rich reflects the Parent Impact Model in her emphasis on the home and the family as the primary teachers of the child.[8] James Comer's work in the New Haven public schools is tied to the Comprehensive Services Model, which unites all parties and agencies in the educational structure.[9]

Dorothy Rich, founder of the Washington-based Home and School Institute, is a popular author and lecturer in the area of parental involvement. She proposes practical, hands-on, daily activity-oriented interaction between parents and children to underscore and reinforce learning. The organization is dedicated to strengthening the bonds between the home and the school to work together to develop strong skills, interactive families, and cooperative learning experiences that underscore but do not supplant the child's classroom learning experiences.[10]

Their "nondeficit" approach to learning assumes that all homes are able to provide meaningful learning experiences for children and that parents, with guidance, are able to perform the tasks even in the poorest household. This "parents as tutors" model provides "social reinforcement to the family in the form of increased attention both to the parent from the school and from the parents to the child."

One of the strategies the Institute suggests is a series of "Home Learning Recipes," which provide specific, low-cost learning activities for the child and parent to perform at home. The model assumes that the parent is the child's first teacher and the most important teacher the child will ever have. It stresses positive and varied learning experiences in the home, with the family. A respect and support for education as well as development of a positive self-image and self-confidence for both parent and student is an ultimate goal of the program.

This model appeals to the basic motivation for parents to become involved in the educational process, that is, to help their children do better in school. The effects of this model are (1) increased motivation of the child, (2) increased skill development in the child, and (3) an improvement in the self-image of the parents. In addition, this model reflects a program that creates a foundation of support and involvement for other forms of parental interaction and involvement. The focus changes from an approach in which we are no longer concerned with "what needs to be fixed" but instead with "what can we build on."[11]

The program offers the following seven characteristics for developing a school's program in this model.

1. Parent participation is most widespread and sustained when parents view their participation as directly linked to the achievement of their children. The intrinsic reward and motivation for the parents is the success experienced by their children.

2. Parent/community involvement programs need to include the opportunity for families to supplement and reinforce the development of academic skills with work in the home. This allows for participation of parents who are not always able to attend school meetings.

3. Involvement programs should provide for various modes of participation.

4. Involvement opportunities need to exist at all levels of schooling. This includes the middle and high school years too.

5. The impetus for parent/community involvement has focused on federally funded compensatory programs. Strategies that involve the whole community ensure broader support.

6. Parent/community involvement programs are more effective when school boards, community agencies, and professional organizations offer active support and cooperation.

7. Parent/community involvement must be viewed as a legitimate activity of the school and an integral part of its delivery of services, not just an add-on.[12]

Implementation of such a program requires parents and educators to accept new roles. They must work together to share new ideas and skills. The focus of the school would be family-centered rather than child-centered. Teachers would build partnerships with families to address mutual needs, concerns, and goals.

Continuing the theme of involvement as the ultimate goal of parent programs, Dorothy Rich's *Megaskills: How Families Can Help Children Succeed in School and Beyond,* is being read by many concerned parents who would like to assist their children's learning by using practical, easy methods. Rich feels that for children to learn and keep learning basic skills at school, they need to learn another important set of basic skills in the home. These are the megaskills — a child's inner engines of learning. Though they are reinforced in the classroom, they get their power from the home. The home is an integral part of Rich's educational philosophy. Here the children develop long-lasting skills and impressions. Here the child has its most important teacher and role model.

Megaskills provides home-based activities, "recipes" to help develop megaskills in children. Such skills include confidence, motivation, effort, responsibility, initiative, perseverance, caring, teamwork, common sense, and problem solving.[13] These play strong roles in determining a child's success in school and in the world of work and family beyond. The book contains activities to address and build upon each of the above skills in a way that involves parents and children so that families can learn to work together and play together in constructive, meaningful activities that strengthen both academic and family life. Parents are the first and best teachers that children will have, and every family has something to offer in the way of learning no matter how poor, disadvantaged, or busy its members may be.

This book has much to offer parents and teachers alike. Too often urban educators do not acknowledge the strengths and abilities that the parents of their students possess. This nondeficit approach is of particular interest to professionals as they develop homework for their students.

Both parents and school administrators, having come to realize that their roles must be cooperative, are developing models that assist in a cooperative approach to managing and governing schools in order to meet the needs of all involved.

Formal programs of parent participation have been in place in our schools for years. The most noted of these in the United States is the PTA, Parent-Teacher Association, the oldest and largest organization working on behalf of children and youth in this country. The National Congress of Parents and Teachers, as the PTA is officially known, supports the premise that parents are the child's most important educators and advocates a stronger and more involved parent role in the schools. However, there is an evolving role of parent and citizen participation in local education, and it is hoped that the impact of such changes on school districts will encourage and support educational programs that meet the diverse needs of the individual school

population. Recent developments in parent and citizen participation have resulted from movements such as school decentralization, federally mandated parent advisory councils, parent/citizen councils mandated by state or local school officials, child advocacy organizations, citizen advisory councils mandated by court-ordered desegregation plans, court decisions, and changes in the national PTA and some local PTAs.[14]

A handbook most useful to administrators interested in developing parent programs that are respectful of the rights and needs of the community is published by the National Committee for Citizens in Education in Columbia, Maryland. *Beyond the Bake Sale: An Educator's Guide to Working with Parents,* by Anne Henderson, Carl Marburger, and Theodora Ooms, should be required reading for every school principal.[15]

The book is based on the belief and research that emphasizes the importance of parent participation in the education of young children. Families and schools must look beyond their traditional roles and examine their interaction in light of present-day society. Traditional roles are no longer adequate, and the separation of parents and educational professionals prevents children from gaining the most from our educational institutions.[16]

The traditional role of parents — organizing bake sales and like activities — is no longer appropriate. Schools have found that they are not able to meet students' needs in a vacuum. Parents must work with educational professionals to meet the diverse needs of youngsters of the 1990s. Another Henderson volume gives educators advice and direction in establishing constructive and meaningful school/parent partnerships.

One interesting point the authors make is the distinction between *participation* — to enjoy, or suffer, with others; to have a share in common with others — and *involvement* — to cause to be inextricably associated or concerned; to engross or occupy absorbingly. It is involvement that we need, for it implies a deep sense of commitment.[17]

Five types of parent involvement are outlined.

- Partners: Parents performing basic obligations for their child's education and social development.

- Collaborators and problem solvers: Parents reinforcing the school's effort with their child and helping to solve problems.

- Audience: Parents attending and appreciating the school's (and their child's) performance and productions.

- Supporters: Parents providing volunteer assistance to teachers, the parent organization, and to other parents.

- Advisers and co-decision makers: Parents providing input on school policy and program through membership in ad hoc or permanent governance bodies.[18]

This book provides advice, practices, and guidelines that schools and principals can use to develop better understanding and lines of communication between the home and the school. A step-by-step format for building parent involvement is also suggested. Barriers to effective school/parent communication are presented, including such issues as lack of time on the part of the parents and the teachers, lack of transportation for some parents, distance between home and school, neighborhood safety issues, employment problems such as inflexible work schedules and lack of child care.

Schools and parent organizations must begin to address these issues since such problems will only become more severe in the future. Schools must survey their parents to develop unique methods of sharing and cooperating to address the needs of their unique school community. Principals and teachers may need to develop in-service programs and training activities to assist all parties in developing a deeper understanding of these issues.

There is no one best model for parent involvement; each school must develop its own unique design. However, teachers must realize that when these studies are presented there is overwhelming documentation that parents want to be involved in their child's education in some way. We must help them find the best and most suitable way for them. The roles must be variable and well planned. Educators need parents as much as parents need strong supportive schools. The turf battles must end.

Henderson's summary itemizes seven important points that may be learned from the studies presented:

1. The family provides the primary educational environment.

2. Involving parents in their children's formal education improves student achievement.

3. Parent involvement is most effective when it is comprehensive, long lasting, and well planned.

4. The benefits are not confined to early childhood or the elementary level: there are strong effects from involving parents continuously throughout high school.

5. Involving parents in their own children's education at home is not enough. To ensure the quality of schools as institutions serving the community, parents must be involved at all levels in the school.

6. Children from low-income and minority families have the most to gain when schools involve parents. Parents do not have to be well educated to help.

7. We cannot look at the school and the home in isolation from each other; we must see how they interconnect with each other and with the world at large.[19]

In studying successful young people Benjamin Bloom, in *Developing Talent in Young People,* targeted a group of talented young professionals who are highly successful in their fields — mathematics, research, music, sports, and other arts and sciences. The research showed the underlying common characteristic of their educational experience was enthusiastic and involved parents.[20]

Interviews were held with the young people themselves and with their families. Although the participants varied widely in background, ethnic grouping, race, and socioeconomic status, all mentioned lifelong support by their parents. This support included constant and direct parent involvement in their children's general education, special lessons, competitions, and in fact for any educational endeavor which attracted them. James Comer presents similar evidence in writing about his early family life.

In all cases the children surpassed the parents' expertise in the target area, but the support and encouragement continued as they sought to master and achieve their goals. Parents reflected a positive attitude, namely that any goal a child selects is within his or her reach.

James Comer, a leading author and popular speaker on parental involvement programs, documents such efforts in *School Power*. He proposed a long-term intervention plan to the New Haven public schools that highlighted increased opportunities for parental involvement in the organization and management of two inner-city schools. This program was initiated as part of a five-year plan between the city schools and the Yale University Child Study Center. Goals of the program included the following:

1. To modify the social and psychological climate of the school in a way that facilitates learning.

2. To improve the achievement of basic skills at a statistically significant level.

3. To raise motivation for learning, mastery, and achievement to increase the academic and occupational aspirations of each child.

4. To develop patterns of shared responsibility and decision making among parents and staff.

5. To develop an organizational relationship between child development and clinical services and the public schools.

Committees established in each of the targeted schools included a governance body composed of administrators, teachers, parents, and support staff. A school committee comprised of elected parent representatives selected staff, established curriculum, and evaluated the program. Finally, a pupil personnel team provided necessary services for teachers and students.

In-service programs were held for parents and teachers to allow them to begin to work together. Parents were trained to work as aides in the schools. Teacher-training and parent-participation programs were held three days per week. During the five years of the study, both participating schools attained the best attendance records in the city, noted improvement in student behaviors, and reported better parent/staff interactions and near grade-level academic performance by the students.

Comer, a popular lecturer on this program and on the importance of parental involvement, highlights the importance of his mother in his own success and in that of his siblings. This reflects the work of Bloom.[21] Representatives from the New Haven schools involved in the study speak glowingly of the success of the program and how they have continued to develop the model even though the initial experiment has ended. Their success serves as a beacon for us as urban educators.

The transition from home to school has traditionally been difficult for a number of reasons. Children often come to school reflecting the negative school experiences of their parents. Thus their apprehensions include their parents' recollections, their own fear of the unknown, and the stories their older peers and siblings impart to them.

Educators and parents must view the children as the central and most important persons in their lives. Productive collaborations, which demand this, cannot succeed

unless all parties affirm this basic truth. Respect for the children's history, culture, family, are all vital if we are to develop successful partnership programs.

> Schools will only become comfortable and productive environments for learning when the cultural and historical presence of Black families and communities are infused into the daily interactions and educational processes of children. When children see a piece of themselves and their experience in the adults that teach them and feel a sense of constancy between home and school, then they are likely to make a much smoother and productive transition from one to another.[22]

Sara Lightfoot's research regarding the school's role in developing parent partnerships is reinforced by the research of Joyce Epstein[23] and Carol Ascher.[24] All highlight the need for schools to develop open lines of communication between the institution and the parents who entrust their children to such institutions. Urban parents are victims in this power play owing to teachers' perceptions and prejudices based on lack of understanding and differing class status. Ascher states,

> The fragile links that have long existed between the schools and poor and minority parents have also been made more tenuous by periodic suspicion and misunderstanding on both sides — with school staff often overwhelmed by bouts of futility, and parents equally often filled with resentment. While school administrators and teachers have often seen these parents as failing to provide their children with the intellectual and motivational prerequisites for successful learning, the parents (themselves often undereducated by prevailing standards) have viewed teachers and schools with a mix of awe and anger.[25]

Before urban partnerships can be established, educators must take a long, hard look at themselves and at the community they are serving. It is easy to say that we strive for increased parental involvement, but in order to develop a strong and trusting relationship with our parents we must come to a better understanding of our children and community. Unless we develop such insight we cannot understand the needs of the community and the programs that encourage support, participation, and involvement.

As we approach the twenty-first century, we must acknowledge the rapid changes that have transpired during the last decade and the even greater changes that we will face in social structures, government, education, and industry of the future. As we reflect on our position we must acknowledge the interdependence of our lives and institutions. Massive reforms are needed to prepare productive citizens for the coming century.

One avenue of potential change is the suggestion that educators look to community, parents, universities, and business for collaborative programs. Educators, who have traditionally viewed the school as their domain, have a pervasive distrust of outsiders becoming involved in "their" territory. Collaboration does not come easily.

Outsiders often view school staff members as uncooperative and rigid, and teachers view themselves as isolated and not respected as professionals. Teachers have learned to be hesitant about embracing change. Their roles have changed little but the daily demands on and requirements of them have multiplied. The ongoing criticism of schools and teachers provides little motivation and self-respect. "Innovations threaten someone's sense of prestige. Modifying existing behaviors, introducing new

programs, or involving other participants all generate resistance from those who are comfortable with old ways and existing distributions of authority."[26]

Despite these facts we know that teachers are dedicated, hardworking, enthusiastic professionals who need opportunities for interaction, sharing, communication, and decision making; given these opportunities, they are capable of great change. Teachers need empowerment, which collaboration can give them.

Partnerships are a vehicle, a means for educational systems to develop to meet the needs of our future. School partnerships must develop slowly and carefully, with guidelines of mutual trust, respect, sharing, and cooperation. Comer and his New Haven colleagues voiced these same concerns. The difficult beginnings of their project support these words of caution. All parties must be viewed as vital and important members of the group. Each must respect the opinions, expertise, and resources of the other members.

Common features of interactive partnerships between schools and organizations include involvement of new resources, promotion of sharing information, seeking greater utilization of community resources, reduction of the isolation of the school community, encouragement of decision making and problem solving, and assurances that they are voluntary, cooperative, and flexible.

Criticizing urban educational institutions is a popular pastime of the media. Such criticism is not unfounded; however, too often individuals are blamed for circumstances that are completely out of their control. True urban educators spend time and effort developing the skill and understanding of the cultural phenomena that are so large a part of education. Blaming and finger-pointing will not change the trend. Only insight, understanding, and a desire to encompass change will support the drive to make our urban schools an extension of the desire that exists in each one of us to offer our children a bright and limitless tomorrow.

Options for Change

Until relatively recently, most of the reform literature has not been aimed at specific problems within inner-city schools. Numerous reports critiqued the way schools worked and the lack of foresight to meet the demands of the late-twentieth-century style of American life.

The print and electronic media are quick to find fault with the education systems in our country. Urban educational structures are cited for providing substandard education and producing graduates who are on the edge of illiteracy. Business and industry support this belief in the constant criticism of the workers who apply to their personnel departments for employment. The nationwide call for change is loud and clear. However, there appears to be no one best resolution to the problem.

All schools desire strong supportive parent involvement programs, but educators must understand that not every parent is capable of active and visible participation in the form of school council membership, volunteering within the school, or assisting with field trip activities.

Involvement programs should encourage parents to take on greater responsibility for their own child's education. Based on the 1987 "Metropolitan Life Survey of the American Teacher" conducted by Louis Harris Associates, a majority of both parents and educators felt that too many children are left alone after school; parents do not

utilize discipline constructively; parents are not enthusiastic about education and transfer their negative attitude to the child; parents for one reason or another lack interest in the educational process of their child and give little concern to supervising homework assignments. To be effective, programs must be long lasting and offer parents a variety of activities to keep them involved. When we, as educators, attempt to formulate concepts for parental involvement we must consider all aspects of the families we are trying to encourage.

In 1990 the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics published the following data, which we must weigh heavily in the development of home/school programs: over 73 percent of all women with school-age children work outside the home; almost 25 percent of all children under eighteen live with a single parent, and barely 7 percent of school-age children live in a two-parent household.

Educators must realize that the families of urban America are not the families of traditional middle- and working-class neighborhoods of even twenty years ago. The pressures families face today range from coping with high expectations, pervasive negativism people harbor toward one another, the increase in competition for economic stability, the large influx of immigrants from Latin America, Southeast Asia, and the Caribbean with their language and ethnic differences, shifts in our population's demographics, and issues of race and class. These stresses have had strong implications on the inner-city community where the traditional middle-class minority families who helped unite the community have moved on to suburban locations as opportunities have opened up for them. They leave behind many single-parent households with children ranging in age from five through thirteen, increasing the urban population, looking ahead, from 1990 to 1995 of Latinos by 17 percent, blacks by 12 percent, whites 5 percent, and Asians and others 4 percent.[27]

Mothers who work long hours to support families and dual-income households (43% black, 69% Latino, 78% white) struggle just to survive.[28] A society producing children who are having children, the phenomenon of latch-key children, drug dependency, and the increasing violence presented by the formation of street gangs all contribute to the downfall and safety of the community's population.

As a consequence of the decline of the inner-city structure, schools are experiencing increases in such crimes as homicide, rape, robbery, assault on students and teachers alike, and the increasing presence of drugs and weapons. Add to these concerns the factor of language presented by our new wave of immigrants and these issues begin to become overwhelming. The complexities of modern life have had devastating effects on education. These burdens have resulted in a decline in parent involvement in education at a time when more is demanded. One of the perverse ironies of contemporary urban America is that children who are most in need of parental support — inner-city students from socioeconomically deprived backgrounds — often receive little or no encouragement from their families. Educators must create ways to make parents realize just how vital their role is in the education of their children. The result is that urban schools often are characterized by little parental involvement and large doses of apathy.

Given these difficulties, urban school educators must make additional efforts to assess the needs of their population in order to develop viable programs, schedules, and support mechanisms necessary for successful parent involvement. We must offer activities that appeal to the vast interests of the parents. Opportunities to hear guest speakers or view videos on relevant topics would offer parents a personal learning

experience. They would be able to take home a new skill, gain new knowledge about an issue, expand on an old skill, and become exposed to ideas and concepts that are new to them or receive explanations that clear up misconceptions they harbor.

Traditional parent involvement activities centered around parent-teacher conferences, open houses, school plays, and award ceremonies are just not bringing out the parents in the numbers they once did. The influences of safety, transportation, work schedules, health factors, and child care must now be considered in planning any school function or event. School time schedules should vary to allow all parents an equal opportunity to attend meetings. A show of flexibility and understanding about our changing society is extremely important if inner-city schools are to survive and flourish.

Encouraging parents to visit schools during open house days and making them feel truly welcome is one way to forge a positive partnership. We must help build a sense of shared responsibility and caring between parents and teachers. Keeping parents informed of school practices and policies is a must. Methods must be developed to establish active parent-school councils, organize a network of parent volunteers on a regular schedule, and develop parent outreach programs. Phone communication networks can be set up and run by parents who inform one another about important school activities.

Teachers can make attendance phone calls, informing parents about their children and the classwork they miss. Packets concerning timely topics of educational interest and newsletters or bulletins providing information about school activities can be sent home on a regular schedule. Parent call-in times for each teacher and daily or weekly student reports can also be sent home.

Research has shown that effective schools have children whose parents help them with homework and have better overall attitudes about education than children not receiving help from home.[29] Studies have shown that student achievement does improve when parents get involved. Parents can help by creating positive learning environments at home, by encouraging positive attitudes toward education, and by setting high expectations for their children's achievement.[30]

Home-based parent involvement has a stronger effect on student achievement than traditional forms of school-based parent involvement. With all varieties of participation available, home-based parent involvement — for example, tutoring, coordinating home learning activities with schoolwork, and providing enrichment activities — has a vital role to play.[31] Basic recommendations toward forming a family-school partnership include:

- Make parents feel welcome and needed.
- Arrange for frequent communication with parents.
- Treat parents as collaborators in the education process.
- Encourage parents to share in decision making.
- Encourage all parents to become involved.
- Principals must be open to parents' ideas.
- Encourage involvement from all aspects of the community.

Reginald Clark, in *Family Life and School Achievement*, focused on certain attitudes for helping success or failure.[32] These included frequent parent-teacher communications initiated by the parent, parents stressing the importance and value

of education within the home, parents providing quality and quantity time or work study interaction with the child, and parents setting high standards and expectations for every member of the family.

Other recommendations in forming partnerships should offer the following, as suggested by Dorothy Rich in *The Forgotten Factor in School Success:*

- Provide family reinforcement skills.
- Provide for parent involvement at all levels.
- Assign educational tasks to the family.
- Provide family with practical school information.
- Provide for working parents and single mothers.
- Provide encouragement to all parents to participate.
- Provide various conference schedules.
- Provide for early detection of learning problems.
- Provide an open and welcome atmosphere for parents.[33]

One suggested activity for family participation was the formation of a homework contract program in which parents sign their children's homework papers. This gets parents involved with what their children are doing and lets the children know that they will be checked by someone at home as well as by the teacher at school. Teamwork can start right at this level.

Parents should be encouraged to participate in all school events. The best way to get parents involved is by inviting them to be field trip chaperones. Schools always can use extra lunch monitors, reading aloud participants, fund-raisers, classroom aides, and parent-to-parent volunteers. Parents should be inspired to be chairpersons of school events and functions, and they should be utilized as role models for the children at every opportunity.

Providing practical information from school to the home can be accomplished easily. One method is to begin in August, before school starts, and continue until the last day of school in June. Parents and students receive a welcoming letter in August that gives the school address and phone number, the school hours, and any available bus information. When school opens in September, a school information packet containing the names of the staff, the rules and policies of the school, a code of discipline contract, a homework contract, phone numbers connected with the school's medical and dental collaborative, a school calendar, and a parent volunteer request form is sent home. This provides basic information that the parent can keep and refer to if any questions arise. Receipt of this packet involves parents immediately, even if only on a small scale.

Arrangements must be made for scheduling conferences with working parents. Accommodating their diverse work schedules should be personally handled by individual teachers with each parent. Parent-teacher conferences should take place as close as possible to the time requested by the working parent. Schools should have an open-door policy for parents. Making them feel welcome and wanted eliminates the hostility many teachers experience when they know parents are coming to school. Parents whose involvement is actively sought by teachers tend to report increased understanding of school programs and form positive attitudes about teachers and the school. Teachers and parents become teammates, not enemies.

Parents and teachers must begin to work with each other. The changes in our society highlighted by the erosion of the traditional and extended family, the plight and decline of our inner-city neighborhoods, the increased exposure to violence our children face every day, and the unprecedented amount of stress being placed not only on our children but also on the family unit make this partnership mandatory. Parents and teachers must realize that we need each other, as allies, if our children are to receive a successful education and become responsible adults.

A partnership with educators, initiated by either side, can provide students with a supportive and nurturing environment, but neither parent nor educator can effectively "go it alone."[34] ❧

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