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ABSTRACT

Because a review of the literature showed little systematic knowledge about effective school-home communication at the secondary level, a survey of parents of secondary-level students was undertaken in a large West Virginia school system that had begun to achieve apparently effective school-home rapport. A stratified, random sample of parents was selected to represent two high schools serving mixes of rural and urban families of varied socioeconomic status. The sample of 120 families was stratified to include equal numbers of 10th, 11th, and 12th grade students and equal numbers of boys and girls within grade levels. Interviews with the parents sought information on actual home-school communication practices in the system, parents' reactions to such practices, and their suggestions for improvements and possible innovations in communications. Results show that school newsletters were most often mentioned as the contact between home and school, though personal contact with school personnel (albeit infrequent) and interim academic progress reports also proved to be significant contacts between school and home. Parents responded most positively (1) to regular and timely newsletters on school activities and (2) to being notified when their children were having difficulties and needed assistance or correction. Although parents generally lacked information on what they could best do in response to problems at school, an effective communications program should include followup suggestions in its early notification of parents. (Author/JW)

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SCHOOL-HOME COMMUNICATIONS

AT

THE SECONDARY LEVEL[1]

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ABSTRACT

A review of literature and current practices revealed that there is little systematic knowledge about effective school-home communication practices at the secondary level. Instead, extrapolations were found to the secondary level from early childhood practices.

A brief interview form was designed for use with parents of secondary level students. The interview sought to document, within a large school system that had mandated "effective" home-school practices: (1) actual school-home communication practices, (2) parents' reactions to these, (3) suggestions for improved practices, and (4) views of what, from a parental perspective, may work at the secondary level. Interviews were conducted by telephone at a time convenient to individual families. Nearly all families could be contacted by phone at home or work or at an emergency number.

A stratified, random sample of parents was selected to represent two West Virginia high schools serving mixes of rural and urban families of varied SES. The sample of 120 families was stratified to include equal numbers of 10th, 11th, and 12th grade students and equal numbers of boys and girls within grade levels.

Those practices which are time-honored at earlier levels are little used by parents at the secondary level--but not necessarily underutilized, from the perspective of parents. Secondary parents preferred mediated forms of communication, i.e., newsletters, special notification in the event of student difficulties or problems, etc.

Evidence suggested strongly that these parents are not less interested than elementary level parents in how their children are faring in school. When presented with these findings, principals at these schools were able readily to generate plans for using them to improve their schools' effectiveness in practicing home-school relations.

SCHOOL-HOME COMMUNICATIONS AT THE SECONDARY LEVEL[1]

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School-family relations has long played a central role in early childhood education (Butler, 1974). Within the early childhood model parents and teachers communicate regularly; parents are urged to visit the classroom and typically they do so; and parents are involved by the school in their children's learning activities. This partnership of school and home is encouraged because the home is recognized as a primary contributor to the child's intellectual, social, and emotional development. Or as the early childhood educators' truism has it: Parents are the child's first teachers; education is thus erected as surrogate upon the foundational role of parent as teacher.

In recognition of the important effects of the home, elementary schools have developed programs to increase parental involvement and to strengthen home-school relations. Evidence of this fact can be seen in the substantial number of journal articles, during the 1960's and 1970's, relating to parent participation in school activities (Anselmo, 1977). An examination of current elementary practices supports the observation that they are based largely upon the early childhood model (Brandt, 1979; Education Commission of the States, 1979; Gordon & Breivogel, 1976; Nedler & McAfee, 1979).

In order to examine the range of practices briefly summarized above, we had also performed computer searches of ERIC, Psychological Abstracts, and other major data bases of periodical literature. We

looked in particular for practices at the secondary level which might have undergone some kinds of validation study. Although a wealth of preschool and elementary studies was assembled, scientifically conducted studies at the secondary level were exceedingly scarce. When they appeared, they tended once more to follow the model that has been so extensively developed in early childhood. Where we found promising secondary school practices, these usually had been introduced into the schools as a part of massive innovation efforts, making it impossible to identify the effective independent variables or even to isolate school-family relations as an overall treatment (Collins, Moles & Cross, 1981). Nevertheless, some limited research makes it appear that the home environment can influence cognitive functioning and academic performance on into the secondary school years (Keeves, 1975; Schaefer, 1971; Walberg & Marjoribanks, 1976). We did not find comparable evidence for the home-school connection's influence at the secondary level.

To summarize, we had set out to discover effective home-school practices, particularly at the secondary level. The research and practice literature on this was voluminous. It told us most surely about effective preschool practices, suggested much about the applicability of these practices at the elementary level, and offered little systematic guidance at the secondary level. Yet educators believed and attempted to apply the early childhood model at all levels. It will be self evident, however, that (a) reading to your child, (b) scheduled parent-teacher conferences for everyone, and (c) bringing parents to school periodically for a show-and-tell open house may not as readily relate to the needs of schools and parents at the

secondary level as at earlier levels. Bearing in mind the possibility that a model mismatch-to-level existed in the thinking of many, we set out to study secondary practices by using exploratory methods of investigation as described below.

METHOD

Arrangements were made with a large West Virginia county school system to conduct the study as a collaborative activity. This system was selected because it had mandated what were believed to be exemplary communication practices at all levels, including: (a) interim reporting of unsatisfactory coursework process, one-half way into each grading period--thereby allowing time for corrective action and (b) prompt notification of parents when a student is absent, with unexcused absences carrying penalties when they exceed a specified limit. Two high schools within the system were selected for study because they (a) reputedly engaged in additional exemplary practices and (b) had a desired variety of urban and rural families of varying socioeconomic levels.

Principals[2] from the two schools initially discussed with us their own questions regarding their practices of home-school relations. Although approached individually, there was remarkable similarity in the two principals' questions. We were, thus, able to construct essentially identical interview protocols for the two schools. They approved final versions of the interview forms, after which they assisted us with sample selection.

Within each school an oversampling procedure was used to yield an expected final participation rate of 60 families per school. Families were selected to represent about equal numbers of 10th, 11th, and 12th graders and equal numbers of boys and girls within grade--e.g., 10 girls and 10 boys in grade 10, etc. Within the foregoing strata, sample selection was performed at random, except that no family was contacted if its telephone number was unlisted to the public. Emergency locator cards at the schools indicated that virtually all families could be reached by telephone at home or work or through some emergency number.

The interview had been designed to require 15-20 minutes for completion. It sought to document (1) actual home-school communication practices as experienced by these parents, (2) their reactions to these, (3) suggestions for improved practices, and (4) views of what, from a parental perspective, might work at the secondary level. All customary "protection of human subjects" procedures were followed, and families were asked at the interview's termination to indicate any remaining questions or comments which they might have had.

A technical report containing the interviews and coding procedures is available from the author.[3] Both structured and open-ended questions were used. Coding relied heavily on content analyses. Measures were taken to reduce responding purely on the basis of social desirability. A separate validity study of the interview with 90 families suggested that it was satisfactory for the present purposes.[4]

RESULTS

Final sampling figures for schools H and S were 66 and 65, respectively. Actual numbers of respondents varied from question to question depending upon how many persons responded and the codability of their answers. Relative to the stratified portion of the sampling design, the two schools were pooled and comparisons were made by analysis of variance of possible differences in parent orientation as a function of either child's sex or grade level. Neither factor was associated with parent orientation toward or experience of school-family communications. Therefore, all subsequent analyses were conducted without regard to child grade level or sex.

Next the two schools were compared to one another. Parents from the two schools experienced home-school communications quite similarly and shared kindred orientations toward the relative value of particular efforts of the schools to communicate with them. The only exceptions to this generalization were encountered on a small number of questions about which the respective principals had suggested in advance that they had given particular emphasis to certain practices. For example, school S had more vigorously notified parents about student grades, going beyond the mandated reporting--resulting in a more frequent acknowledgement by those parents that they were familiar with this practice (with 1 degree of freedom, chi square was 3.84, $p = .0500$). School H had had student workers call parents about absences, which practice was not as favorably received by parents as calls from adults only (chi square = 4.81, d.f. = 1, $p = .0283$). Nevertheless, similarities far exceeded differences.

It now became possible to describe for each school the typical parent responses to individual practices. Treated in this way, findings for the two schools can be viewed as corroborating one another in independent samples.

A majority of parents attend extracurricular activities at the schools (H = 73.8%; S = 65.1%). Compared to the hypothesis that only half the parents attend, the results for both schools exceed at a high level of significance when tested by chi square (p less than .001). The one-half or 50 percent figure definitionally represents the point beyond which a majority can be said to exist, so is used throughout these comparisons. Athletic events account for the larger part of this attendance. By way of contrast, although both schools have parent advisory councils and parent meetings, overwhelmingly parents do not attend these (H = 77%; S = 68.3%). The probability of not attending significantly exceeds 50 percent (p less than .001). That is, a majority of parents attend special purpose extracurricular events, whereas a majority do not attend general purpose parent meetings.

At both schools parents were highly aware of participating in home-school communications (H = 95.1%; S = 91.8%). Again by our statistical definition, these majorities are highly significant.

Newsletters, which both high schools provided, were the most salient (i.e., most likely to be first mentioned) and most often mentioned means of communication. Up to four types of communication were coded for each respondent. These resulted in high cumulative exposure to newsletters (H = 86.8%; S = 73.0%)--again significant

majorities. Attitudes toward newsletters, when mentioned, were rated on a three point scale. Favorable reactions predominated (H = 60.8%; S = 71.7%), with unfavorable reactions being rare (H = 2.0%; S = 4.3%). We could also determine from the content of parents' remarks whether they read the newsletters, merely scanned or casually read them, or did not use them. Of those with ratable mentions, most parents read the newsletters (H = 76.7%; S = 86.4%). Less than 10 percent of parents at each school failed to read or ignored the newsletters they received. Parents, moreover, often commented spontaneously on the issue of whether information in the newsletters reached them in a timely manner (H = 24.6%; S = 34.9%). Such mentions were most often complaints if news arrived late.

A majority of parents had some personal contact with school personnel (H = 70.5%; S = 68.3%), although the actual frequency of contact is only "occasional." The occasions prompting such contacts were quite varied within the school, when coded into nine content categories. Occasions across schools also showed considerable variation. From this it is apparent that there are multiple reasons or occasions for contact, and that provision needs to be made for them all (e.g., for academic, athletic, attendance, behavioral, early departure, extracurricular activities, scheduling).

Regarding interim academic progress reports (i.e., half way into a grading period), parents were largely aware of the practice (H = 75.4%; S = 85.7%). If aware, most considered this practice useful or helpful (H = 78.6%; S = 94%). The difference in awareness between schools only approached significance (p greater than .05), whereas the judgment of the practice's utility was significantly different (p less than .05). The

marginal difference and the significant difference corresponded to a somewhat expanded notification practice by school S. Somewhat under a majority of parents acted upon this information (those acting: H = 45.9%; S = 50.7%). Actions taken fall within a restricted range of options, suggesting the need to provide additional information that might lay out more possible actions for parents to consider.

When asked how serious a child's problem or difficulty at school should be before parents are notified, parents overwhelmingly wished to be notified either of everything of potential significance (H = 57.4%; S = 68.3%) or of many named problems (H = 37.7%; S = 30.2%). Only 1.6 to 3.3 percent of parents did not wish to know about a child's problems at school. This sizeable expression of parental interest in being informed contrasts with the often expressed assumption that they are disinterested.

CONCLUSIONS

Parents reacted positively to receiving two types of information from high schools: (1) newsletters detailing the school's program and extracurricular events and (2) notification that their child was having difficulty or needed some kind of assistance or corrective action. They wanted to help under the latter circumstances but were not highly resourceful regarding kinds of actions to consider. It appears, thus, that schools will need also to provide guidance to parents about effective courses of action to consider. Parents of high schoolers, contrary to stereotype, appear to have strong interest in how their children are faring in school. They wish generally to express this

interest on an as-needed basis, however, whenever the school notifies them that they may wish to become involved. All of this suggests that schools can efficiently operate a communications program for high schoolers' parents by relying on a dual strategy: (1) regular and timely newsletter communication, (2) early notification of parents, together with brief follow-up suggestions, whenever potential problems arise academically or behaviorally.

When presented with the study's findings for each school, the respective principals reported that they found surprises and received results that generally had been unavailable to them. They tended spontaneously to make remarks about how they could use the information developed to confirm what they were already doing as well as to further improve their efforts in the future.

ADDED NOTE IN PROOF

Since the initial exploratory study, similar interviews have been conducted with several hundred parents from four counties. The general findings reported above have been encountered repeatedly across sites and family circumstances.

NOTES

1. This work was supported in part through a grant from the National Institute of Education (NIE). Their support is gratefully acknowledged. The views expressed herein are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect those of the NIE or of the Appalachia Educational Laboratory.

2. Special thanks are due to Mrs. Norma Winter, Principal, Sissonville High School, and Mr. Charles Burford, Principal, Herbert Hoover High School, for their contributions to this study.

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4. The validity study was conducted with families from AEL's HOPE Follow-Up Study (Gotts, 1983) performed after the main follow-up study was completed.

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