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PROMOTING EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION BETWEEN SCHOOLS AND PARENTS OF DISADVANTAGED STUDENTS

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ABSTRACT

It is widely accepted that in recent years the number and the proportion of at-risk, disadvantaged students have increased dramatically in our nation's schools -- and that they are projected to increase even more dramatically by the year 2000. Effective communication between school personnel and parents of disadvantaged students generally is viewed as a critical ingredient for successful student programming.

This paper provides a discussion and analysis of (1) the factors and conditions which are suggested as placing increasing numbers of students at high risk for educational disadvantage (e.g., poverty, being a member of a racial/ethnic minority group, living in a single parent family, having limited English proficiency, inappropriate or ineffective curricula etc.); (2) common barriers and obstacles which often prevent effective parental involvement in their child's educational program (e.g., false assumptions about level of parental interest and motivation); and (3) major attributes of successful school-parent programs. The roles and responsibilities of school psychologists in promoting more effective communication between school personnel and parents of disadvantaged students are discussed along with specific suggestions for increasing their level of meaningful involvement in this process.

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At-Risk Students in Today's Schools

At-risk students presently are receiving unprecedented attention in both the professional literature and public communications media. In particular, educationally disadvantaged children and youth have been the subject of widespread debate and concern at the federal, state, and local levels in contemporary American society (Bacharach, 1990; Children's Defense Fund, 1990, 1991; Davis & McCaul, 1990, 1991; National Commission on Children, 1991; National Law Center on Homelessness and Poverty, 1990; Schorr, 1989; Slavin, 1989).

Disadvantaged students, however, are not a new phenomenon in our nation's public schools. For several years, researchers (Catterall & Cota-Robles, 1988; Hahn, Danzberger, & Lefkowitz, 1987; Hodgkinson, 1985; Levin, 1985, 1988) have called attention to the significant problem of educationally disadvantaged students within our schools, warning that unless more effective means can be found for delivering appropriate educational services to this population, not only would these students suffer personally, but also that there would be severe negative consequences for our nation's economic welfare and even our social and political stability.

Contributing Factors and Conditions

We know which factors and conditions cause the cycles of social, economic, and educational disadvantage in our nation to continue, most notably: persistent poverty; lack of affordable, safe housing; family dysfunction; inadequate health care and poor nutrition; and ineffective educational programs.

Natriello, McDill, and Pallas (1990) view educational experiences as coming not only from formal schooling, but also from the family and the community. Thus, students who are educationally disadvantaged have been exposed to inappropriate educational experiences in at least one of these three institutional domains. These authors view schools as only one of several educating institutions that simultaneously affect a student's growth and argue that remediation cannot be confined to the school alone.

Natriello, McDill, and Pallas (1990) cited five key indicators which are associated with educationally disadvantaged children and youth: (1) living in a poverty household; (2) minority/racial group identity; (3) living in a single-parent family; (4) having a poorly educated mother; and (5) having a non-English language background. All of these indicators are correlated with poor performance in school and they are clearly interrelated. They combine to create a vicious, self-perpetuating cycle of educational, social, and economic disadvantage.

Commonly, at-risk students have been referred to as "educationally disadvantaged" in the professional literature. Levin (cited in NSBA Monograph, 1989, p.6) defined educationally disadvantaged as "those who lack the home and community

resources to benefit from traditional schooling practices. Because of poverty, cultural obstacles, or linguistic differences, these children tend to have low academic achievement and high dropout rates. These students are heavily concentrated among minority groups, immigrants, non-English speaking families, and economically disadvantaged populations" (p. 6).

Usually educationally disadvantaged students are associated with our inner cities. Yet, the popular perception that at-risk children and youth are found almost exclusively in inner-city schools in poor neighborhoods is challenged in a recent report, An Equal Chance: Educating At-Risk Children to Succeed published by the National School Boards Association (NSBA) in 1989. Findings contained in this report suggested that "as many as three-fifths of this population [at risk] may be dispersed throughout the country in rural and suburban areas" (p. 1).

Further, the NSBA Task Force on At-Risk Youth encouraged local school boards to develop their own working definition of local youth who are considered to be at risk -- one which focuses on issues and factors which reflect local concerns and demographics. As a general guideline, the NSBA Task Force offered the following broad definition of at-risk children and youth: "Those who are subject to environmental, family, or societal forces over which they have no control and which adversely affect their ability to learn in school and survive in society. As a result, they have uncertain futures as students, workers, and citizens, and ultimately are unlikely to become productive members of our society" (An Equal Chance:

Educating At-Risk Children to Succeed: Recommendations for School Board Action, NSBA, 1989, p. 6).

Clearly, it is very difficult to develop a specific definition of students at risk -- or at least one which would gain widespread acceptance among all who might rightfully view themselves as having a special interest and investment in this population, including professionals from various disciplines, parents, advocates, policymakers, as well as students themselves. There certainly are some students who may do quite well academically and even graduate with honors, but who are at high risk emotionally or socially. There are others who not likely be considered to be at risk as measured by most commonly employed criteria but who do, in fact, suffer a great deal of pain during their schooling because they are generally viewed as and treated as different from the established norm. These students often have different value systems from the majority of their peers. This diversity is not valued, respected, or in many cases, not tolerated; while in others, it is even ridiculed. As a result, some students because of their incompatibility with the general norm are placed at high risk for poor overall adjustment (Davis & McCaul, 1990).

In general, however, most authors characterize at-risk students as those who are likely to leave school without the necessary skills to succeed academically, socially, and/or vocationally in today's or tomorrow's society. They are those children and youth, who for whatever reason or combination of reasons, are not prepared to become self-reliant citizens. They are those students who have already dropped out of school as well as those in school who are

likely to drop out instead of graduating. These at-risk students often are regarded as victims -- victims of forces and factors which serve to contribute adversely to the likelihood of their reaching their full potential as adults in today's and tomorrow's American society (Davis & McCaul, 1991).

Certainly, a variety of conceptions of "at risk" presently exists. Some writers even criticize the use of the term *at-risk student*. Herbert Kohl, for example, considers the term to be "racist" suggesting that it "too often is used to refer to mostly young men of color whom schools can't handle" and further that it "defines a child as pathological, based on what he or she might do rather than on anything he or she has aready done -- it is a projection of the fears of educators who have failed to educate poor children" (cited in Nathan, 1991, p. 679).

Nevertheless, however one defines *at-risk* or whether or not this term even is employed, it is readily apparent that the number of children in the United States who presently are in great jeopardy is likely to grow if recent demographic trends are any indication.

Despite the broad and imprecise nature of the available indicators of the educationally disadvantaged population, it is clear that substantial numbers and troubling proportions of U.S. children may be classified as educationally disadvantaged. In terms of any single indicator between 10% and 25% of children between the ages 0 and 17 may be classified as disadvantaged. Because these indicators are not totally redundant, any single indicator underestimates the size of the educationally disadvantaged population. A conservative estimate is that **at least 40%** of these children are at risk of failure

in school on the basis of at least one of the five disadvantaging factors: poverty, racial/ethnic minority status, living in a single-parent family, having a poorly educated mother, and having limited-English proficiency (Natriello, McDill, & Pallas, 1990, pp. 30-31; Pallas, Natriello, & McDill, 1989, pp. 17-18).

There are numerous indicators that lead to a concern about the status of both today's and tomorrow's children. As cited by Davis and McCaul (1991), among these major indicators are the following:

• **Our nation's schools will experience differential population shifts in the future both in terms of student age and minority representation.** The number of all preschool children has increased by more than 3 million since 1980, but this number is expected to decrease again by 2000. The number of elementary school children continues to be low in the early 1990s when compared with 1970 enrollments, but it is projected that this number will increase through the year 2000 before again declining. The number of secondary school youth, following a decline through the early 1990s, will increase by the year 2000.

The number and proportion of minority children in our nation's schools is projected to rise significantly during the next two to three decades. Based on several indicators, including earlier childbearing and higher fertility rates of certain minority groups, especially blacks and Hispanics, some demographers project an almost 200 percent increase in our nation's population of blacks by the year 2020, and an almost 300 percent increase in the Hispanic population. It is projected that by the year 2000, 40% of our public school students will be representatives of some ethnic/racial

minority group. Many of these minority group children are likely to be poor.

• **Children represent the single largest and fastest growing poverty group in the United States.** Of all persons considered to be poor in the U.S., 40 percent are children. Nearly 20 percent of all children under the age of 18 presently living in this country are poor. Of all of the major indicators which are commonly associated with educational disadvantage, poverty is the one most significant indicator.

• **The younger a child is, the greater are his or her chances of being poor.** Of all children age 3 and under, 23 percent are poor; nearly 22 percent of 3-5 year olds are poor; and more than 20 percent of 6-11 year olds are poor.

• **Being a member of a minority group significantly increases the chances of a child to be poor.** Most poor children in America are white. It is estimated that 1 in 7 white children currently living in America are poor. However, black and Hispanic children in particular, are far more likely to be living in poverty households than are white children. In 1987, 45 percent of all black children were poor, while 39 percent of all Hispanic children were considered poor. Overall, the median family income of white children is generally considered to be one and three-quarters times that of Hispanic children and twice that of black children.

• **Family living arrangements of children in the U.S. have changed dramatically in recent years.** In 1955, 60 percent of all U.S. households consisted of a working father, a housewife mother, and two or more school-age children. In 1985,

only 7 percent fit this pattern. As of 1988, nearly 25 percent of all U.S. children were living in single-parent families, the mother in over 90 percent of the cases. Living in a single-parent household has been well documented as one of the major indicators for placing children at risk for educational and broader social and economic failure

• **Parental level of education has increased in recent years, but minority parents' level of education continues to lag behind level of nonminority parents.** One of the major indicators associated with educationally disadvantaged children and youth is the educational level of their parents, especially that of the mother. Children of poorly educated mothers have been found to perform worse academically and leave school earlier than children of better educated mothers.

• **The numbers of homeless and "precariously housed" children in the U.S. are rising dramatically.** Although specific estimates vary, the number of children who have no permanent shelter has increased significantly in recent years. The negative consequences of not having a safe, permanent residence are many and complex, not the least of which is lack of access to a quality education. Young children in families represent the fastest growing single group of homeless in America. Although there are many reasons which contribute to a child being homeless, one of the major causes is the **lack of safe, affordable housing.**

• **America continues to lag far behind most other industrialized countries regarding maternal and child health care.** Although most of our nation's children are in good

health, many key health indicators clearly point toward a decline or stagnation of progress in maternal and child health care during the 1980s. One in five children in the U.S. has no health insurance. Our nation ranks nineteenth in the world in infant mortality and twenty-ninth in low-birthweight births.

• **American students' level of academic achievement continues to be disappointing.** Half of our nation's 17-year-olds do not have reading, math, and science skills that would allow them to perform moderately complex tasks such as summarizing a newspaper editorial or calculating decimals. The high school graduation rates in our country have increased by only 3 percentage points during the past two decades. Approximately 25 percent of all students do not complete high school.

The achievement gap between minority and white children narrowed during the past decade, but not as much as during the previous two decades. Poor and minority students together currently make up approximately one-third of the school-age population in America. Although they enter school only slightly behind their more advantaged peers, poor and minority children fall further behind as their schooling progresses. By third grade, blacks and Hispanics are six months behind; by eighth grade, they are two years behind; and, by twelfth grade, they are more than three years behind.

Poor teenagers are four times more likely than nonpoor teens to have below-average basic skills, and they are three times more likely to drop out of high school. Whether they graduate or not, black and Hispanic 17-year olds have

reading and math skills about the same as those of white 13-year olds. In science, their skills are about the same as those of white nine-year-olds.

• **The number of babies being born to unwed women is at an all-time high in the U.S., with the fastest growing group being 15 to 17-year olds.** Early childbearing carries a double burden. It is physically damaging to the mother, who, in many respects is still a child herself. Also it is frequently a major factor in contributing to our country's extremely high rates of low birthweight and neonatal mortality. In 1989, the U.S. spent $21.5 billion dollars on families headed by teen mothers. Teen pregnancy often perpetuates the insidious cycles of economic, social, and education disadvantage for both teenage mother and child.

• **There has been a steady and alarming increase in the number of reported child abuse cases in the U.S. in recent years.** In 1989, approximately 2.4 million child-abuse reports were filed with the National Committee for the Prevention of Child Abuse -- with more than 400,000 of these reports involving sexual abuse. Also in 1989, state child protection agencies throughout our country reported nearly 1,250 child-abuse related deaths -- a 38 percent increase over 1985.

• **Fetal Alcohol Syndrome is now generally regarded as the leading cause of mental retardation in the western world, and the second leading cause of birth defects in the United States, affecting approximately 1 in every 650 babies.** Estimates now indicate that each year in the U.S., 50,000 babies are born with alcohol-related problems, and of these, over

12,000 demonstrate the full Fetal Alcohol (FAS) dysmorphology (Davis & McCaul, 1991, pp. 3-7).

Parental Involvement in School Programs

Despite the fact that nearly every significant report on schooling in America released in recent years has emphasized the critical role which parents must play in their child's overall education, there continues to exist a major gap between theory and practice in this regard. The importance of meaningful parental involvement in their children's educational programs has been viewed as being especially critical for disadvantaged families. Yet, it is this specific group of children and parents -- those considered to be at the greatest risk for failure because of poverty and social disadvantage -- for which attempts at forming effective parent-school partnerships have, with some clear exceptions, been least successful.

Common Barriers and Obstacles

Researchers and parents alike have offered some generally consistent reasons for this lack of effective parent-school partnerships. Among the most commonly cited barriers and obstacles in this area are the following (Bane & Jargowsky, 1988; Olson, 1990; Schorr, 1989; Zill & Rogers, 1988):

(a) Lack of agreement over specific roles and responsibilities: Parents and educators often have conflicting views relative to the

very purposes of schooling as well as to the specific roles and responsibilities which each of them should have in this process. Sara Lawrence Lightfoot, in her widely cited study, Worlds Apart: Relationships Between Families and Schools, suggested that "parents want what is best for their children while teachers search for standards of fairness that apply to all the youngsters in their classroom ... [as parents and teachers argue about who should control a child's life in school, conflict is inevitable] the ambiguous, gray areas of authority and responsibility between parents and teachers exacerbate the distrust between them ... the distrust is further complicated by the fact that it is rarely articulated, but usually remains smoldering and silent" (cited in Olson, 1990, pp. 18-19).

(b) Lack of awareness of changing family configurations and dynamics: Many educators are fully aware of the vastly different family configurations and dynamics which presently exist in America as compared with those of the 1950s, but others are not. Some teachers are painfully aware of the negative consequences upon the academic and social performance of students which often result from living in a single-parent family, a racial/ethnic minority family, a limited-English family, a persistently poor family, and/or a homeless family. Unfortunately, other teachers are not as aware.

Even in those situations wherein educators are fully aware of the often devastating consequences of the above conditions, frequently frustration and anger occur. Teachers understandably often feel helpless to reverse some of the physical and psychological conditions which they may, very correctly, identify as being

substantial impediments to their ability to provide their students with appropriate and meaningful instructional programs. It is not uncommon to hear some teachers state: "These students already have two strikes -- and in some cases, three strikes, against them when they enter the classroom -- what can I possibly do to help them?

The frustration and anger that many teachers feel in these situations is understandable. Many feel that they are being asked to assume responsibilities for problems which are well beyond their ability to solve -- and they are often asked to do this with limited resources -- and without the cooperation and active involvement of the parent(s) of these students. It is easy to appreciate why so many contemporary teachers, especially those who are expected to work on a daily basis with seriously disadvantaged students, become, if not totally cynical, extremely frustrated and angry.

It is important, nevertheless, that educators and school psychologists not be too judgmental regarding what they perceive to be a lack of interest or caring on the part of many parents of their "disadvantaged students." What they may be interpreting as lack of interest or caring on the part of these parents may be something totally different.

(c) *False assumptions regarding perceived lack of parent interest:* Many teachers often develop false assumptions about the parents of the children that they teach -- especially poor and minority parents. They assume that many such parents either cannot or will not contribute to their child's education. Many of

these parents, it is assumed, are incapable of <u>really participating</u> in a collaborative effort to promote their child's best educational efforts. Still many other parents who fall within this category, it is assumed, don't really care enough about their child to expend the energy and effort necessary to bring about optimal academic gains. These may be totally false and extremely dangerous assumptions. In fact, the results of several recent research studies appear to suggest that this is precisely the situation that obtains.

"Studies of poor and minority parents in Maryland, New England, and the Southwest have found that they care deeply about their children's education, but may not know how to help" (Olson, 1990, p. 21).

Joyce Epstein, Principal Research Scientist and Director, Effective Middle Grades Program, Center for Research on Elementary and Middle Schools, The Johns Hopkins University, has been conducting research on teachers' practices of parent involvement and the effects of family-school connections on students, parents, and teachers for over a decade. Epstein disagrees with the assumption held by some educators [poor families don't have the same goals for their their children as middle-class families]:

"Data from parents in the most economically depressed communities simply don't support that assumption. Parents say they want their children to succeed; they want to help them; and they need the school's and teacher's help to know what to do with their children at each grade level. Our data suggest that schools will be surprised by how much help parents can be if the parents are given useful, clear information about what they can do, especially at home.

We're seeing the same results emerge from many studies by different researchers using different methods of data collection and

analysis. If schools don't work to involve parents, then parent education and family social class are very important for deciding who becomes involved. But if schools take parent involvement seriously and work to involve all parents, then social class and parents' level of education decrease or disappear as important factors" (Joyce Epstein, as cited in R. Brandt, 1989, p. 27).

There are numerous other examples of programs which have been operating successfully throughout our nation which provide a strong, convincing argument against the assumption that poor, disadvantaged parents don't care about their children's education or are not capable of being effective participants in school-parent partnerships. Among some of the most widely recognized of these programs are the following:

The Accelerated Schools Program, which presently operates in two schools in California and seven schools in Missouri, attempts to raise parents' expectations about what their children can do, while it focuses on giving literacy training to the parents. The goal is to empower parents so they can become more involved in their children's education.

The Schools Reaching Out Project, organized by the Institute for Responsive Education (IRE) at the Boston University School of Education, conducted a two-year pilot study of ways to develop new relationships between low-income parents and schools in two inner-city communities (Roxbury, Massachusetts and the west side of Manhattan, New York) with generally positive results. Among the strategies employed by this project to foster more positive parent-school relationships were the establishment of an on-site parents' center in one of the schools; the hiring of a full-time "key teacher" to serve as a link between the school, the students' families, and the

community; the offering of ESL classes for parents; the formation of parent support groups to study for high school equivalency exams, etc. (Reed and Sautter, 1990, p. K9).

The School Development Program, an experimental project headed for 18 years by James P. Comer, Yale University's Child Study Center, provides solid evidence that the barrier of distrust between low-income parents and schools can be broken down effectively. By bringing together mental-health professionals, educators, parents, and others to focus on children's academic, social, and emotional development, Comer and his colleagues were able to reduce parental apathy and improve student achievement and attendance at two predominantly low-income elementary schools in New Haven, Connecticut. This project also has had spinoff benefits for parents as well, with many of them eventually obtaining their GED diplomas (Olson, 1990; Schorr, 1989).

Yet, despite clear successes involving parent-school involvement such as those illustrated above, why is it that so many of our schools generally have experienced difficulty forming more positive relationships with many poor, disadvantaged parents?

Clearly, some poor parents may feel very intimidated by their children's schools. Many of them did not enjoy especially rewarding experiences when they themselves were students. Many parents are school dropouts. They associate schools not only with their own academic failure but also their pervasive feelings of low self-worth. For many poor parents, their own past negative associations with schools, administrators, and teachers prevent them from becoming more active participants in their own children's educational

programs. There simply exists too much distrust and past hurt (Davis & McCaul, 1991).

Other factors and conditions may lead educators and schoo psychologists to incorrectly assume that poor disadvantaged parents lack a true interest in their children's education. For some parents, lack of transportation may constitute a very formidable obstacle. Very simply, they are not able to get to school to attend parent-teacher conferences or participate in normal school activities. This is especially true in rural, isolated regions where the schoolbus may very effectively meet the transportation needs of the student but not those of his or her parents. Yet, even in many inner-cities in order for a parent to attend a school activity, several inconvenient transfers on public transportation are often required (Hodgkinson, 1989).

Family living arrangements also play a major role in preventing many well-intentioned, passionately concerned socially and economically disadvantaged parents from participating more actively in their children's educational programs. Many poor students live in single-parent families in which either the sole parent is working or must stay at home to take care of other children. Childcare costs are often prohibitive for many of these families. Even temporary babysitting which would allow the parent to attend school functions is not a possibility for many parents because of the cost involved or lack of its availability.

Likewise, even in two-parent household situations in which one or both parents are working, poor families often find it difficult to attend school events, including important teacher conferences.

Frequently under these conditions, either one or both parents hold down entry level, low-paying jobs -- positions which generally are much more inflexible relative to getting time off as compared to positions held by most middle and upper-income families. It is generally much easier for a parent who is employed in a professional or semi-professional capacity to arrange his/her work schedule to accommodate most school schedules. This is not the case for most poor or near poor working parents (Davis & McCaul, 1991).

Certainly, many educators and school psychologists are very much aware of this problem, and clearly, an increasingly larger number of schools throughout the country have been very responsive to parents' needs regarding meeting times. Many schools make a concerted effort to offer parents extremely flexible meeting times and do everything possible to make it as easy as possible for parents to participate fully in their own child's education program. Yet, unfortunately this is not true in many other school systems. Educators and school psychologists must guard against misinterpreting what on the surface may appear to be a lack of parental interest for what, in actuality, are real obstacles and impossible circumstances for many parents to overcome.

What is often perceived to be a lack of parental interest or concern may, in many cases, be due to a total misunderstanding of, as well as a major lack of appreciation for, the complexity of intertwined negative circumstances, in which many disadvantaged children and their parents find themselves. Many poor parents are struggling for survival on many levels. For many such parents, their most basic human needs are not being adequately met -- food,

shelter, and health care. Under these conditions, it is difficult for many parents to "become active participants in their children's educational programs" (Davis &McCaul, 1991).

"I know how educators feel when they see kids come to school who haven't been fed or look like they've been neglected or abused ... it makes them sick ... when you see a kid who's way behind in school, who has problems learning and so on, you just tend to blame it on the family -- it's the natural thing to do" offers Anne T. Henderson, an associate with the National Committee for Citizens in Education (cited in Olson, 1990, pp. 20-21). Perceptions among parents and teachers of the other side as uncaring or irresponsible serve to heighten the distance between them. Such images can lead to an escalating cycle of mutual blame and recrimination that is largely unproductive.

Most parents -- including those in the most destitute of circumstances -- want the very best for their children. They do care about their children's educations but often they are unable to act upon these positive feelings because either (1) they are so entrapped by their own problems and their need for basic survival, and/or (2) they simply lack sufficient information as to what specifically to do. Many poor disadvantaged parents may not fully understand or trust their children's schools but still the large majority of them continue to view public schooling as the one possible saviour for the future of their children.

Attributes of Successful Parent Involvement Programs

Despite a proliferation of studies in recent years which have focused on attempting to determine which programming models and strategies are most effective for producing more positive cooperation

between parents and schools, which, in turn, will lead to increased student achievement, little hard research evidence presently exists. Much of the past and current research on this topic suffers from the fact that there has been a wide diversity of reasons offered why parents should be involved in schools. Parent involvement programs often have very different goals and objectives, making evaluative comparisons among programs extremely difficult.

Many programs have focused on encouraging parents to work with their children within the home environment, while others have been primarily, if not exclusively school-based. Some programming strategies have depended heavily upon the use of parents as tutors and school-based volunteers; other programs have focused on developing various strategies for improving communication between the school and the home; while still other programs have actively sought to involve disadvantaged parents in the actual governance of their children's schools -- at various levels.

As suggested by Kagan (1990) in her review of several research studies on parent involvement, "Although the correlation between parent involvement in education and student achievement has been well documented, there is little evidence of any direct, causal link ... For the most part correlation studies [between parent involvement and student achievement] are not sufficiently precise to determine the mechanism by which achievement is influenced... What we need is a more robust research base ... while some organizations are doing wonderful work, one or two organizations will not be able to counter decades of malaise" (cited in Olson, 1990, p.21).

However, Epstein (1989) offered that we are now beginning to collect some valuable data regarding the efficacy of various types of parent involvement programs and we presently have a much better developed knowledge base in this area than we have had in the past. Epstein identified five major types of parent involvement. These five types (Figure 1) occur in different places, require different materials and processes, and lead to different outcomes (cited in Brandt, 1989, pp. 24-25).

Based upon her research on parent involvement, Epstein concluded that *in large measure parents do want to be more involved in their children's learning, especially at home, but that they need clear direction from the school regarding how to be most effectively involved in the overall education process.* Epstein also stressed the need for schools to be creative in their methods for developing effective parent involvement programs at each of the five major levels which she proposed.

Conceding that a very small number of parents (about 2 to 5 percent) may have problems which are so severe that their school involvement, at least for a time, may not be possible, Epstein suggested that in the vast majority of cases, effective and strong parent-school partnerships can be developed -- as long as parents receive the necessary information and guidance from school personnel (cited in Brandt, 1989, p. 27).

Although at the present no solid research base exists which would suggest that any one model of parent-school involvement is clearly superior to any other, there is emerging evidence that successful programs are generally characterized by some *common*

attributes. In brief, the following *program attributes* are likely to significantly increase the chances for successful parent-school partnerships:

- *Parents are treated with respect and their views and opinions are valued.*

- *Assumptions about why parents aren't more actively involved in their children's programs are made with considerable caution. Parental motives are not prejudged.*

- *School personnel maintain varied and open lines of communication with parents. Communication is honest, relevant, meaningful, and frequent.*

- *School personnel make a concerted effort to remove as many obstacles and barriers as possible. For example, parent meetings are scheduled at flexible and convenient times, transportation is provided when necessary, potential language barriers are considered, etc.*

- *Parents are provided with clear, specific, and relevant information and guidance regarding how they can best help their children at school and at home.*

- *Programs take into full consideration the complexity of needs and problems which many disadvantaged parents have and attempt to assist parents with these basic needs and problems. For example, a school might initiate an adult literacy class for parents or help parents "connect" with other social service agencies.*

- *Efforts at promoting positive parent-school partnerships are not limited to the early grades. These efforts often are even more important for students during middle and high school years.*

- *Parents are treated as adults and as equal partners in their children's educational process. They are not only listened to and valued but are also empowered to act responsibly and forcefully on their children's behalf* (Davis & McCaul, 1991).

Role and Responsibilities of School Psychologists in Promoting More Effective Parent-School Communication

It is not entirely clear what specific implications recent school reform movements, including the America 2000 strategy, will have on the roles and responsibilities of school psychologists in our nation's schools. However, as the numbers of students considered to be at risk of educational disadvantage continue to dramatically rise, it is clear that psychologists will, or should, have an increasingly critical role to play in the overall service delivery system to these students -- and their families.

Some observers have issued strong warning that the America 2000 educational strategy, with all of its emphasis on "excellence", national student tests, and model schools, could very well produce even larger numbers of "educationally disadvantaged students" in our future schools (Cuban, 1990; Darling-Hammond, 1990; Kaplan, 1991; Kirst, 1991). Unless broader societal problems, e.g., poverty, inadequate healthcare and nutrition, and lack of appropriate shelter, are more directly addressed, it is argued that the numbers of educationally disadvantaged children in our nation's schools will increase substantially. In effect, an even greater division between the "have's" and the "have-not's" will exist in our society and in our schools.

It is suggested that school psychologists can assist in promoting more effective communication between schools and parents of disadvantaged students in several different areas:

First, it is essential that school psychologists *increase and broaden their own current knowledge base* relative to the needs and concerns of parents of educationally disadvantaged students. The "parental perspective" is critical in order to ensure that the motives and intentions of many parents of these students are not misunderstood. Before attempting to provide help to either school personnel or parents themselves, psychologists should avail themselves of some of the most recent literature available in this area. In my judgment, the following sources should be *required* reading: *Within Our Reach: Breaking the Cycle of Disadvantage* (Schorr, 1989); *The State of America's Children 1991* (Children's Defense Fund, 1991); and *Beyond Rhethoic: A New American Agenda for Children and Families* (National Commission on Children, 1991).

Second, school psychologists need to *become much more active and vocal in contemporary school reform movements.* Many reformers presently are calling for a major restructuring of our nation's schools as well as for significant changes in the methods whereby disadvantaged students are being identified and instructed. Some aspects of these reform efforts could have serious negative consequences for educationally disadvantaged students unless they are closely monitored.

The expertise of school psychologists can be very useful in helping to clarify several issues currently being discussed as part of the America 2000 educational reform strategy. For example, if "by the year 2000, all American students will leave grades 4, 8, and 12 having demonstrated competency in challenging subject matter ..." (Goal 3 of national goals for education) and national standardized

tests are used as the sole measure of student success in this regard, the possible negative implications of these actions for disadvantaged students and their parents must be considered. Will the "push" to demonstrate "academic excellence" result in even greater "failure" (both academically and socially) for many of these students?

Also, there currently is a great deal interest being expressed in promoting "increased parental choice" regarding the selection of specific schools for our country's children. While "parent choice" may indeed allow for greater accountability and improved schools because of the predicted increased competition which will occur among schools, as is being suggested by most advocates of "greater parent choice", will many "disadvantaged parents" not have full access to all of the necessary information available to them (through no fault of their own) in order to make "good choices" for their children? Again, I suggest that school psychologists can and should assume a major advocacy role for parents in this area by helping to clarify the salient issues involved, as well as to increase the level of "meaningful communication" between parents and school personnel in this regard.

Third, school psychologists often are able to promote more effective communication between school personnel and parents by *serving in a facilitator and/or collaborator role.* Because of changing demographics and reduced fiscal and human resources, many of our nation's schools increasingly are becoming more diversified and flexible in their operational patterns. Many schools now operate day care programs for parents. Others offer parenting classes for pregnant teenage students. Still others involve students, parents and

the community in various programs which extend well beyond the "typical school day."

School psychologists increasingly are being presented with opportunities to interact with parents both directly and indirectly through other social service agencies. The school in some communities has become the hub for the delivery of a wide variety of social service programs to disadvantaged students and their families. Unfortunately, however, these services often are extremely fragmented, rendering them largely ineffective. School psychologists can offer a valuable service in this area by actively participating in and by advocating for a holistic, comprehensive, and intensive overall social service delivery model. In some situations, they may serve in a major facilitator capacity. In others, their role may be more of collaborative consultation. In any event, however, school psychologists must become more involved in consultation and collaboration activities within their working environments.

Fourth, it is suggested that school psychologists can be of valuable assistance to both parents and school personnel within the *training* domain.

Teachers and administrators need to become more sensitive to the needs and "issues" of parents of educationally disadvantaged students. They must be made more aware of the common obstacles which often preclude effective school-parent communication as well provided with the opportunity to acquire those skills which are necessary to engage parents productively in their children's educational programs. While formal workshops and staff development sessions clearly may be helpful within this area, it is

often the more informal "professional reminders" and "day to day positive, non-judgmental behaviors" modeled by school psychologists which, in the long run, may prove to be the most effective "training strategies."

All parents need help in "how to effectively parent their children." The need for the acquisition of good parenting skills, however, often is more critical for parents of children who are identified as "high risk." School personnel frequently misinterpret the behaviors and motives of parents of disadvantaged children. What they may interpret as being a "lack of cooperation" and/or a non-caring attitude on the part of many such parents, in reality, may be more reflective of "feelings of frustration and despair" on the part of many parents who desperately are trying themselves to survive against extremely difficult odds. All too often these parents feel overwhelmed by the complex, negative circumstances in which they find themselves.

In some cases, parents also lack effective parenting skills. When these skills can be taught, their own lives, and certainly very often the lives of their children, become much more improved, tolerable, and happier. I suggest that there is no more effective method which a school psychologist can employ for improving communication between parents and school personnel than to help parents to improve their own self-esteem and to learn how to interact more positively with their own children. Sometimes, parents need help with their own basic human needs and issues before they can be expected to become "effective communicators" with their children's schools.

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