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ABSTRACT

Family involvement in schools will work only when perceived as an enlarged concept focusing on all children, including those from at-risk families. Each publication reviewed here is specifically concerned with family involvement strategies concerned with all children or targeted at primarily high risk students. Susan McAllister Swap looks at three parent involvement philosophies and examines effective practices, using Joyce Epstein's five parent involvement categories. Swap argues that a philosophy recognizing home/school/community partnership offers the ·test promise for increasing at-risk children's academic achiev Don Davies redefines parent participation, based on the work of several pioneers linking such involvement with school reform, and recommends that parent centers and home visitor programs be incorporated into elementary schools. In a review of 17 family education programs aimed at reaching low-income groups, Barbara Dillon Goodson and colleagues find no one program or method best for all at-risk families; the most successful programs are responsive to family differences. Siobahn Nicolau and Carmen Lydia Ramos discuss the reasons Hispanic families must be reached and strategies for organizing and sustaining family involvement with this population. Lynn Balster Liontos, in a report on at-risk family involvement, identifies ways to overcome barriers and suggests specific components needed for forging successful parent-school partnerships. Educators must avoid patronizing such families and realize the importance of empowerment and collaboration. (MLH)

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Family Involvement

Lynn Balster Liontos

Every educator is aware of the potential of parent involvement for improving children's school achievement. But while many also realize the importance of involving *families* in school reform, most schools pay only lip service to meaningful school-family partnerships.

One reason is that long-standing attitudes are often slow to change. Research has found that many educators aren't really interested in family concerns. Another reason is that there is a large gap between theory and practice in the area of family involvement. A new mindset among educators is needed, bolstered by research that provides concrete suggestions.

Family involvement, as we are coming to understand it in the '90s, will work only if we perceive it as an enlarged concept that focuses on *all* children, not only in theory but in practice. This means reaching at-risk families, whose ranks are increasing and whose children are most in need of family involvement programs.

Reaching at-risk families is something that schools with conventional parent programs have often overlooked, either because they don't know how or haven't understood the importance of doing so. But only if *all* children—which means poor and minority students as well as middle-class ones—are able to raise their achievement levels can our nation maintain its competitive edge economically and politically, and have a chance to overcome increasing social crises and class divisions.

Each of the five items reviewed here is specifically concerned with family involvement strategies that affect all children, or are targeted at primarily at-risk students.

Susan McAllister Swap looks at three parent involvement philosophies and examines effective practices, using Joyce Epstein's five categories of parent involvement. Swap argues that a philosophy that recognizes home/school/community partnership offers the greatest promise for bringing the academic achievement of at-risk children up to middle-class levels.

Don Davies discusses the need for an enlarged definition of parent involvement. He offers a new definition based on the work of several pioneers who link such involvement with school reform, and suggests three ways in which schools can incorporate family involvement.

Barbara Dillon Goodson and colleagues review 17 family education programs aimed at reaching low-income families. They find that no one program or method is best for all at-risk families, and that the most successful programs are those that are responsive to differences between families.

Siobhan Nicolau and Carmen Lydia Ramos focus on the reasons why Hispanic families must be reached, the difficulties that exist, and what schools can do to organize and sustain family involvement with this population.

Lynn Balster Liontos, in a review of research on at-risk families, identifies ways to overcome barriers and suggests specific components needed for success in school partnerships with at-risk families. She lists practical ideas on how to engage and support at-risk families in involvement programs.

Lynn Balster Liontos is a research analyst and writer for the ERIC Clearinghouse on Educational Management at the University of Oregon.

Swap, Susan McAllister. **Parent Involvement and Success for All Children: What We Know Now.** Boston: Institute for Responsive Education, 1990. 85 pages. ED 321 907.

Swap looks at parent involvement in general and emphasizes that improving school achievement for *all* children must be a national priority. She organizes parent involvement practices into three philosophies—school-to-home transmission, interactive learning, and partnership for school success—and hypothesizes that the third can lead to the highest gains in student achievement.

School-to-home transmission, the model for many parent programs, emphasizes educators specifying what parents should do to support their children at home—and hoping that they do so. These programs often reflect an unwillingness to consider parents as equal partners and are not very successful at reaching at-risk families.

In interactive learning, the idea is for students to experience success within the mainstream culture, without sacrificing the goals and beliefs of their non-mainstream cultures. While Swap admits that this is an attractive philosophy for at-risk families, she sees several problems with it. For instance, learning about another culture takes a great deal of time and administrative support. Also, classrooms are often filled with children from several different cultural backgrounds; attempts to meet this diversity through interactive learning could easily result in fragmentation.

Swap is most hopeful about an emerging third model, in which schools view parent-school partnerships as fundamental to children's success. In a setting of mutual respect and shared power—including consensus about goals, a revised curriculum, local autonomy, and partnership among educators, parents, and community members—such collaboration can work effectively and solve problems.

An important new element in this model is viewing the *community* as a school partner, recognizing that it can provide needed support for at-risk families. Swap cites James Comer's School Development Program and Henry Levin's Accelerated Schools as successful examples of this approach.

Davies, Don. **"Schools Reaching Out."** *Phi Delta Kappan* 72: 5 (January 1991): 376-80, 82. EJ 419 909.

Davies, president of the Institute for Responsive Education (IRE) and director of the Center on Families, Communities, Schools, and Children's Learning at Boston University, provides several suggestions from IRE's national Schools Reaching Out project, which sought to redefine and expand parent involvement in urban school reform. Among the ideas that could be incorporated into any elementary school without major restructuring are *parent centers* and *home visitor programs.*

A parent center can transform a school by welcoming parents and encouraging their continuing presence. At the Ellis School in Boston, the parent center involved 150 of the school's 350 families with activities that included ESL and GSD classes, breakfasts for fathers, and a referral service to help parents deal with community agencies. All that is required for a parent center are physical space, adult-sized tables and chairs, a staff of parents, a telephone, and a coffee pot.

A home visitor program makes it possible for schools to provide information, guidance, and materials to those families who do not or cannot come to the school. At Ellis School, home visitors provided information about the school's expectations and curriculum to about 75 families who had little contact with the school, listened to family members' concerns, conveyed them to teachers, and connected families with appropriate community agencies.

Davies states that a home visitor program should include:

- A new definition of parent involvement that views families as sources of strength
- Funds to pay home visitors
- Training for home visitors
- Supervision and support
- Communication between administrators, teachers, and home visitors to ensure that work in students' homes is closely linked to classroom and school objectives.

Goodson, Barbara Dillon; Janet P. Swartz; and Mary Ann Milsap. **Working with Families.** Cambridge, Mass.: Abt Associates, 1991. 11 pages.

This paper examines 17 promising "family education" programs that serve children between three and eight years

About ERIC

The Educational Resources Information Center (ERIC) is a national information system operated by the Office of Educational Research and Improvement (OERI). The ERIC Clearinghouse on Educational Management, one of 16 such units in the system, was established at the University of Oregon in 1966.

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old, target low-income families, and are linked with public schools. Goodson and colleagues summarize program characteristics as well as methods used to recruit and sustain family involvement, and relationships with schools.

They also identify some specific staff qualifications and characteristics associated with high-quality programs:

- Hire professional or paraprofessional staff who share the culture of the target population.
- Use paid staff to a greater extent than volunteers.
- Provide adequate training and staff development opportunities.

Nicolau, Siobhan, and Carmen Lydia Ramos. **Together Is Better: Building Strong Relationships Between Schools and Hispanic Parents.** New York: Hispanic Policy Development Project, 1990. 76 pages. ED 325 543.

This book grew out of three years of research that showed interaction between poor Hispanic parents and schools ranged from low to nonexistent. As a result, the Hispanic Policy Development Project sponsored a competition to test strategies that would increase Hispanic parental involvement. Forty-two projects received grants that eventually resulted in some much-needed insights.

One difficult area with at-risk Hispanic families is recruiting them—getting them to attend that first event. Nicolau and Ramos found that, with the exception of home visits, most methods proved inadequate. The most effective method, according to 98 percent of the project coordinators, was the personal approach—talking face to face in the family's primary language.

Research also found that schools cannot design appropriate partnership programs with Hispanic families until they understand who their partners are. Are they single parents? Do they speak English? Is transportation available? The projects that took the time to answer questions like these were the ones that succeeded.

The following do's and don'ts emerged from project analysis:

- Do assign recruitment to someone who understands the culture of the ethnic group, and give that person time to do the job.
- Do build parent networks, using a nucleus of involved Hispanic parents to motivate and organize other parents.
- Do post the principal or teachers outside the school in the mornings and afternoons to greet parents who drop off and pick up their children.
- Do follow up visits with a friendly phone call.
- Do provide babysitting, rides, or transportation money for those who need it.
- Don't use English-language mailings or flyers to invite parents to activities.
- Don't send invitations and notices on official school stationery; make them appealing and non-intimidating.
- Don't hold the first activity at school (which can be threatening to parents with little or no education).
- Don't plan a formal meeting or conference as the first activity—instead, hold a fun activity as an icebreaker.

Liontos, Lynn Balster. **At-Risk Families & Schools: Becoming Partners.** Eugene, Ore.: ERIC Clearinghouse on Educational Management, 1992. 156 pages.

Liontos organizes this synthesis of research and practice on at-risk family involvement into six parts: background information; components of successful at-risk family involvement; support for families and teachers; special ages; special groups; and the process involved in recruiting and sustaining at-risk home/school partnerships.

Of special interest is a chapter on barriers for schools and teachers in involving at-risk families:

- Many teachers doubt their ability to work with such families, or believe that the parents in these families don't really care about their children's education.
- Schools often fail to make at-risk parents feel welcome and frequently focus on negative communication.
- Teachers lack the time and funding to participate in special programs.
- There is a widespread but inaccurate perception that at-risk families are "hard to reach."

Liontos shows how schools can overcome such barriers, pointing out that the first requirement of successful programs is to replace old assumptions with new beliefs, including these:

- *All* families have strengths, which must be emphasized.
- Parents *can* learn new techniques, skills, and behaviors.
- Most parents really care about their children.
- Cultural differences are both valid and valuable.

Certain groups of people are particularly important to reach, and Liontos devotes a chapter to each of these groupings: Rural families; divorced, separated, and single parents; teenage parents; fathers; parents of children with disabilities; immigrants; Asian-Americans; African-Americans; and Hispanics.

Educators must seek to understand how the beliefs and personal situations of people in these groups affect their children's success, says Liontos, who recommends ways of overcoming cultural barriers and describes three im-

portant principles that guide successful family-involvement programs:

1. A *nondeficit approach*, in which educators avoid looking down on families or patronizing them, but instead utilize their assets.
2. *The importance of empowerment*, which recognizes that at-risk families often feel powerless, and that giving them more control over their lives—and their children's education—will be helpful.
3. *The importance of collaboration*, in which schools understand that they alone can't provide all the help and resources that at-risk families need, and that they must also work with the community. □

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