

SECRET WEAPON DISCOVERED!

Scientists Say Parents Partnering with Teachers Can Change the Future of Education

BY ROBERTA FURGER

When my daughter was in kindergarten, her school's principal issued an invitation to the adults assembled in the multi-purpose room for back-to-school night. "We need your help," she announced to the crowd of moms, dads, grandmas, and grandpas. Our first opportunity to get involved, she told us, was to join the School Site Council, the group of parents, staff, and community members charged with plotting the direction of the school.

Bright eyed and ready to make a difference, I marched up after the meeting and volunteered. The principal smiled, handed me the meeting schedule, and said, "Great. I'll see you next Monday at 3:30."

That was twelve years ago.

Since then, I've clocked hundreds of hours as a parent volunteer: Besides a five-year stint on the School Site Council, I've participated in technology committees, hiring committees, and school-reorganization committees. I served two terms as PTA president, managed cookie-

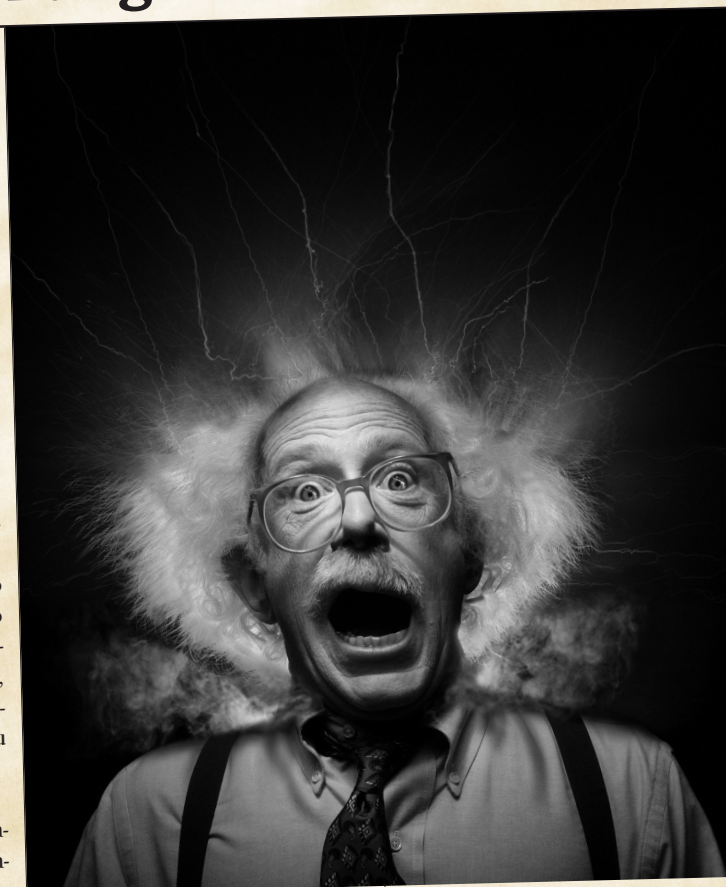
dough and cheesecake sales, organized flea markets and family math nights, drove on field trips, volunteered in the classroom, and coordinated class parties and teacher-appreciation days. And

although I have lingering frustrations about involvement that at times seemed superficial (we spent less time talking about student achievement than we did planning parties and raising

funds), I know the time was well spent. It benefited the school and, without question, it benefited my kids.

For me, there was never a question about getting involved in my children's schooling. My mom had volunteered as the school nurse and later the school librarian when I was young, so it seemed natural and right that I, too, would get involved. And although I've always been employed full time, I've had the good fortune over the years to work for employers who have allowed me the flexibility to adjust my hours or take time off to accommodate my volunteer activities at school.

But for many parents, getting involved at school—or even fully supporting their child at home—is anything but straightforward or easy. Many work in jobs that offer no flexibility for illness or other family crisis, let alone the "luxury" of volunteering at school. Others never finished high school, or had such a miserable K-12 experience that they feel ill prepared to support their own child.



Language differences are another huge impediment for many parents. The number of school-age children who speak a language other than English at home increased by 161 percent between 1979 and 2003, according to the U.S. Department of Education. Nationwide, these children account for roughly 19 percent of all K-12 students (though in the western United States, they represent nearly one-third of all school-age children).

Although many schools embrace the linguistic and cultural differences of students and their parents, in many others, the parents' inability to communicate in English is an incredible barrier to participation. Just like English-speaking tourists flummoxed about the institutions of a far-off country, immigrant families often feel bewildered by the U.S. public school system. They don't care any less about their children or value education less than English-speaking parents, but understanding how the system works, let alone finding a role for themselves in it, is not as straightforward as marching up to the principal and saying, "Sign me up."

MARGINALIZED PARENTS STRUGGLING KIDS

Such was the case in 1998 at Susan B. Anthony Elementary School, in Sacramento, California, where a high percentage of Southeast Asian immigrant families in the school community spoke little English, lived in poverty, and were almost completely disconnected from the school. Each morning, they walked their children to the schoolyard gate and then stood outside and watched until the students lined up and headed into class. Parents rarely attended school functions (which were conducted mostly in English), seldom met with teachers, and had

little understanding of how to support their kids at home.

Students' attitudes reflected their parents' disconnect. Test scores were among the lowest in the district, and attendance rates were dropping. In one year, there were 140 suspensions. As often happens in struggling schools, a culture of blame developed. Parents felt disrespected and marginalized. Teachers said they were unsupported in their efforts to serve the high-need students. Far from being partners, teachers and parents were adversaries. The students, many of whom were failing, were caught in the middle.

"We had to do something differently," recalls Carol Sharp, who was principal at the time. "We had to connect to this community."

That's exactly what the staff at Susan B. Anthony and eight other area schools began doing in 1998. Working with a local community-organizing group, Sacramento Area Congregations Together, the district instituted a pilot program in which teachers visited the homes of their students twice a year. Working in teams of two (teachers often



paired up with an interpreter or the school nurse), the school staff reached out to parents and began to forge relationships

with the previously marginalized community.

For the first time, teachers shared coffee and sometimes even a meal with their students' families. They listened as parents talked about their hopes and dreams for their children and saw firsthand the daily challenges many of them faced. Parents, for their part, began to better understand their role in supporting their children's education. They were introduced to strategies for working with them at home. And they received an invitation: Come to school. Help in the classroom. Be our partner.

BE OUR PARTNER

Those few words opened the door to a home-school partnership that transformed the struggling school community. Within two months of the first round of home visits, 600 family members came to school for a potluck dinner and parent meeting—a trend that continued at subsequent events. Working together, parents and teachers addressed students' behavioral issues early on, enabling the school to reduce suspensions to 5 in the year following implementation of the Parent-Teacher Home Visit Project. Student achievement improved, and test scores began to climb. At Susan B. Anthony and at many of the other initial pilot schools, home visits quickly became part of the school culture.

Throughout the district, in fact, schools were transformed by home visits. The pilot program proved so successful that the state enacted legislation

BIG IDEAS!

In each issue, *Edutopia* publishes an essay focusing on one of ten ideas for improving our schools (www.edutopia.org/bigideas). The sixth in the series, this one focuses on an aspect of our ninth Big Idea, Involve: Parents. Email your thoughts to bigideas@edutopia.org.

to provide \$15 million in annual funding for schools throughout California to conduct them. Parents and educators from as far away as Boston and the South Bronx have traveled to Sacramento to learn about the model program.

As dramatic as they were, the outcomes at Susan B. Anthony Elementary School and its counterparts throughout Sacramento shouldn't have been a surprise. Parents have a profound effect not only on the life of an individual student but also on the entire school community.

THE EVIDENCE IS IN

In "A New Wave of Evidence: The Impact of School, Family, and Community Connections on Student Achievement," published in 2002 by the Southwest Educational Development Laboratory, Anne T. Henderson and Karen Mapp reviewed years of research on parent involvement, and their conclusions are unequivocal. When parents are involved in school, students of all backgrounds and income levels do better. When their parents are involved, kids are more likely to earn higher grades and score better on standardized tests; they attend school more regularly, have improved social skills, and are better behaved in school; and they are more likely to continue their education past high school.

The deeper the partnerships, the greater the opportunities for broad-based and lasting change. Henderson and Mapp also found that high-performing schools share a critical common trait: a high level of involvement with families and with the community. These high-performing schools, say Henderson and Mapp, focus on building trusting, collaborative relationships among teachers, families, and community members. They recognize, respect, and address families' needs, as well as class and cultural differences. And they embrace a philosophy of partnership in which power and responsibility are shared.

It sounds good. It makes sense. But, unfortunately, partnering with parents isn't the reality in many schools throughout the country.

In their 2004 action brief on the parent-involvement provisions of the No Child Left Behind Act, the Public Education Network and the National Coalition for Parent Involvement in Education cite several reasons for the low level of parental involvement in many schools, including a less-than-welcoming atmosphere, language and cultural barriers, insufficient training for teachers, and lack of parent education or parenting skills.

The most recent MetLife Survey of the American Teacher (the insurance company has conducted an annual teachers' survey since 1984) sheds additional light on this issue. According to the study, new teachers consider engaging and working with parents their greatest challenge (beating out obtaining supplies and maintaining order and discipline in the classroom) and the area they are least prepared to manage during their first year of teaching.

Less than half of the new teachers surveyed were satisfied with their relationship with parents, and a quarter said they were not prepared for the responsibility of engaging parents in

supporting their child's education. Principals aren't much more positive about their interactions with parents; only half of those surveyed expressed satisfaction with those relationships.

Perhaps in recognition of the importance of partnering with parents—and the difficulty some schools have making this a reality—the federal government requires that schools receiving Title I money have a comprehensive parent-involvement policy. But just as you can't mandate that children be friends and play nicely or that employees always collaborate, you can't mandate that schools and parents work together—even for the sake of kids.

MAKING IT WORK

Some school communities are working through the challenges, though, and finding new and valuable ways to reach out and partner with parents. Berea Middle School, in Greenville, South Carolina, for example, not only has developed a laptop initiative using Title I funds that provide low-income students with much-needed access to Web-enabled computers, it also reaches out to the school's parent population at the same time. In order to participate in the laptop program, parents are required to attend workshops that teach them how to use and take care of the new computers as well as how to use the laptop to support their children's learning.

"What they've done is transform the entire school into a learning community," explains Tom Carroll, president of the National Commission on Teaching and America's Future. At Berea, parents, kids, teachers, and administrators are all learning new skills in support of student achievement.

C. P. Squires Elementary School,

in Las Vegas, Nevada, is another success story. The school combined its resources with those of a neighboring middle school to create a comprehensive program for supporting students and their families. Children at both schools participate in a variety of academic and enrichment classes after school, and their parents, many of whom speak Spanish, attend English-language classes. Through this whole-family program, both schools have been able to reach out to parents and provide them with an opportunity to further their own education—a strategy that benefits parents, students, and, ultimately, the entire school community.

Throughout the country, parents and educators are partnering

in reform efforts for schools and school districts that go well beyond the typical parent-involvement program. In Oakland, California, for example, parents team with teachers, community members, and school administrators to form design teams that develop a common vision for newer, smaller schools. Working with district staff, design teams research best practices, visit schools throughout the country, and ultimately create plans for small schools that are both academically sound and relevant to the diverse community of learners they hope to serve.

In the Bronx, parent groups teamed up with the local teachers' union and the school district to tackle one of the most



SIX TYPES OF PARENT INVOLVEMENT

Dr. Joyce Epstein, director of the National Network of Partnership Schools at Johns Hopkins University, developed this framework.

- Type 1: Parenting
- Type 2: Communicating
- Type 3: Volunteering
- Type 4: Learning at Home
- Type 5: Decision Making
- Type 6: Collaborating with the Community

WHEN PARENTS ARE INVOLVED IN SCHOOL, STUDENTS OF ALL BACKGROUNDS AND INCOME LEVELS DO BETTER.

challenging issues facing struggling urban schools: supporting and retaining teachers. Together, the three groups, once at odds over most education issues, developed a program that pays veteran teachers extra money each year to support and assist colleagues. Parents, whose initial efforts led to the innovative program, are part of the school committees that hire the lead teachers. The program has been so effective in supporting and keeping teachers, in fact, that it is being expanded to schools citywide next fall.

The Oakland and Bronx programs are examples of what Dr. Joyce Epstein, director of the National Network of Partnership Schools at Johns Hopkins University, identifies as the fifth type of parent involvement (see "Six Types of Parent Involvement" for the full list): involving parents in the decision-making processes at school. Although such partnerships are difficult and require all parties to move out of their comfort zones, they provide the greatest hope for deep and lasting changes in our schools.

As I've spent time in school communities throughout the country, I've seen firsthand the

HOT LINK

For Web links to parental-involvement resources, visit www.edutopia.org/1476.

power of such partnerships to turn around failing schools and transform entire communities. I've seen immigrant parents become school leaders and frustrated teachers become positive, effective educators through such partnerships. And, perhaps most importantly, I've seen how children in even the most challenging of circumstances can thrive academically when the adults in their lives partner to improve schools.

True partnerships aren't easy. They require trust, respect, and willingness to compromise and, ultimately, to share power and responsibility. Although some might argue that's a lot to expect of parents and educators, given what's at stake—our children and our schools—is it right to expect any less?©

Roberta Furger, contributing editor to Edutopia and a former executive editor of the Edutopia Web site, wrote "NCLB Confidential" in Edutopia's November 2005 issue.



FIVE WAYS TO BOOST PARENTAL INVOLVEMENT

Information is a critical first step to increasing parental involvement, and technology provides schools with fast and reliable ways to get important information out to parents—whether it's a student's grade on the latest test or news about an upcoming parent meeting. Here are five technology-based strategies for getting—and staying—connected. —RF

1. Give every teacher and administrator an email address. Email can be the most efficient and effective way of handling routine matters, such as questions between parents and teachers or scheduling an in-person meeting. Many schools routinely provide all staff with a school district email address. Make sure teachers have easy access to a computer to check email at school—and remote access so they can do so at home, too. A word of caution: Parents who routinely use email for work may expect unrealistically speedy responses from teachers. Avoid parental frustration by clarifying up front that most teachers will be unable to answer email during the regular school day. In most cases, a twenty-four-hour response time is reasonable.

2. Develop (or enhance) class and school Web pages.

Web pages are the most efficient way to give parents a peek inside the happenings of a classroom or school. Pictures of school activities, plus calendars, newsletters, examples of student work, and week-by-week listings of course assignments and due dates, are just a few of the ways teachers or principals are using the Internet to share important classroom and school information with parents. Keep it current, though: An out-of-date Web site is almost worse than no site at all. Assign someone with the time and skills necessary to keep it current and interesting.

3. Distribute electronic newsletters.

Most students aren't reliable couriers. Class and school newsletters or fliers about upcoming events wind up crumpled at the bottom of backpacks or crammed into pockets. Electronic newsletters skip the middleman and send the information directly to parents' email accounts. They're quick, cheap, and reliable. Not every family will have access to email, so continue to provide the hard-copy option for those who need it.

4. Provide online access to student data. From attendance reports to grade books to information about what lunchtime fare a student purchases from the cafeteria, schools are making more student-specific data available to parents via password-protected Web sites. This anytime, anywhere access gives parents up-to-date information on academic performance and behavior, and alerts parents to problems before they reach a crisis point.

5. Distribute laptops for students and families. Laptop programs don't just help students; they help families. In many cases, school-distributed laptops are a student's and a family's first—and only—computer. School-sponsored computer classes for parents can ensure that the whole family can take full advantage of the new tool. Students can use it for school, and their parents can employ it to stay informed about school events, through email or the school Web site.

