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After school extended learning opportunities strengthen our students' chance of success. We know that increased parental involvement is a key variable in raising student achievement.

--Dr. Susan Gourley, Lincoln Public Schools Superintendent, Lincoln, Nebraska

Afterschool: Supporting Family Involvement in Schools

There is no debate about the fact that family involvement in schools boosts student achievement. Families and parents can support their children's schooling by volunteering, attending school functions and participating in parent-teacher conferences. They can become more involved by helping their children improve their schoolwork through encouragement, modeling desired behavior (such as reading for pleasure), monitoring and helping with homework, and actively tutoring their children at home.¹ Studies show that when parents and family members are involved in their children's school, children benefit, schools benefit, and families benefit.²

- Benefits to children are regardless of socioeconomic status, ethnic/racial background, or parents' education level and include:^{3,4}
 - Higher grades and test scores;
 - Better attendance records and homework completion rates;
 - Higher graduation rates and higher postsecondary education enrollment;
 - Lower drop out rates;
 - Decrease in negative behaviors such as alcohol and drug use and violence;
 - Increase in positive attitudes and behaviors.
- Benefits to schools include:⁵
 - Better teacher morale and higher ratings of teachers by parents;
 - Better reputations of schools within the community;
 - Better performance of school programs that involve parents versus identical programs that do not include parents.
- Benefits to families include:⁶
 - Better connection between parents, children and communities;
 - Increase in support and services to families, including opportunities to improve family relationships;
 - Improved relationships between parents and children.

There is a correlation between the level of family involvement and student achievement—the more extensive the family involvement, the greater the impact on student achievement. Further, to produce long-lasting gains, parent and family involvement activities must be well-planned, inclusive, and comprehensive.⁷

Challenges to connecting schools and families

Although educators widely recognize the benefits of family involvement in schools, many are unable to effectively reach out to families. Time constraints, budgetary concerns, and other conflicts can prevent schools from engaging parents. Investigators have identified lack of planning and lack of mutual understanding as the two greatest barriers to effective parent involvement.⁸

Families too may face considerable barriers that inhibit their involvement in schools. Parents may be unable to take time away from work to participate in school functions or activities. They may feel culturally or economically isolated from their community and schools, and feel uncomfortable reaching out. They may not know how to get involved, or even if they should. Sometimes parents report feeling that schools ignore them and don't understand their concerns.⁹

Importantly, data show that both parents and teachers express dissatisfaction with the amount and quality of parent participation—illustrating the critical need to improve connections between school and home. *The MetLife Survey of the American Teacher 2007: The Homework Experience* found that 24 percent of parents report their school does not do a good job of encouraging parental involvement in educational areas. Twenty eight percent of parents are dissatisfied with the frequency of contact they have with their child's school, while 15 percent feel awkward or reluctant about approaching a teacher to talk about their child. Teachers report similar feelings of dissatisfaction: 39 percent give a fair or poor rating to their school for the availability and responsiveness of parents and 36 percent give a fair or poor rating for the amount of support for the school shown by the parents.¹⁰

The MetLife Survey of the American Teacher 2004-2005 Survey: Transitions in the Role of Supportive Relationships found that teachers and principals identified their interactions with parents as a significant source of stress and anxiety.¹¹

The research shows that students are better off in after-school programs linked to their school activities and where their families are involved and engaged with what they are learning and how they are spending their afternoons.

**--Milton J. Little, Jr.,
President, United Way of
Metropolitan Atlanta**

Afterschool programs are a natural way to link families and schools

Afterschool programs provide parents and schools the perfect venue to overcome these barriers to participation. Research shows that parent involvement in afterschool programs provides the same benefits to children, families and programs as parent involvement in the regular school day.¹² Afterschool programs present a gateway into the school for many parents who do not otherwise feel connected to their children's school.

There are several reasons why afterschool programs, by their nature, can more easily initiate interactions with parents. For example: afterschool staff has the ability to meet with parents before or after the work day; afterschool staff, many of whom are community members,

students or community-based youth development workers, can be less intimidating to parents. Parents who feel connected to their afterschool program are far more likely to then connect with teachers and staff from the regular day.

While family involvement in afterschool provides the same benefits to children, families, and programs as family involvement in the school, afterschool is in the unique position to offer families additional support and services that are not possible otherwise. Afterschool programs are in the unique position to:¹³

- Provide parents with referrals to local agencies or organizations for assistance or information;
- Provide referrals to families for other social services;
- Provide specific support to families, either through parent counseling or parent support groups;
- Provide support to families struggling with social and emotional problems through the inclusion of preventative service programs;
- Program sites in neighborhoods with high concentrations of immigrants can develop services and activities specifically tailored to those new residents;
- Send food home with children for families.

Examples of afterschool programs that offer children and families support and services and encourage parental engagement:

- Beacon Centers are a nationwide network of school-based community centers offering afterschool programs and extended programming for youth and families in the evenings, on weekends, and during the summer. In Philadelphia, Beacon Centers operate in 18 underutilized public schools in low-income areas. Beacon Centers serve as a community resource, providing support and services to parents, senior citizens, and other community members. Collaboration is key for Beacon Centers as they build a continuum of integrated support and programs that meets the needs and interests of children and families in the community.^{14,15}
- The Greenwood Shalom afterschool program is located in a predominantly Black and Latino neighborhood in Boston. The program provides homework support, computer instruction, arts and crafts and literacy lessons. At the end of the day, everyone gathers for sharing and reflection. Parents are commonly seen lingering to talk with staff and report feeling comfortable and welcome. As one parent said: “Even if I have a problem at home, I can go and talk to them.”¹⁶
- The Whitefoord Community Program in southeast Atlanta, Georgia, takes a holistic approach in supporting the educational efforts of children and families in the community. The organization provides a bridge between home and school with programs that increase the potential of children succeeding in school. The Whitefoord Community Program offers beyond school hour programs including After School Enrichment, Summer Reading, Bike Rite and the Intel Computer Clubhouse, all of which provide opportunities for children to reinforce and expand their learning experiences. Additionally, GED classes, adult literacy, job readiness programs, computer classes and regular community activities are available.¹⁷

When families are involved in their children's learning, both at home and at school, their children do better in school. Afterschool programs help families feel welcomed, valued, and connected to school and afterschool staff, and to what students are learning and doing in class.

--Leslie Cushman, President, Georgia PTA

Afterschool programs can employ many different strategies to encourage parent participation:¹⁸

- Support families by focusing on family, consider the concerns and needs of the families and children served, and solicit family input;
- Communicate and build trusting relationships by communicating frequently and in positive ways, being there for families and providing leadership opportunities for families;
- Create an environment that welcomes families. Hire and develop family-focused staff by hiring staff who share parents' experiences and background and/or designating a staff member to liaison with parents;
- Build linkages across individuals and organizations, such as collaborating with local organizations, offering to act as a liaison between families and schools, and helping parents develop skills to advocate for themselves and their children at school.

Afterschool programs are implementing these strategies and connecting with families:

- Generacion Diez is an afterschool program in Pennsylvania that connects Latino families with afterschool programming, social services and the school community. The program provides appealing, culturally relevant services for the community, which is made up primarily of Mexican immigrants. The program employs home visits by Latina social workers to establish linkages between families and schools and provide parents with information about the school system and strategies for promoting school success at home. The program also provides social services to families experiencing poverty, illness, abuse and other stresses.
- The Child-Parent Center (CPC) program in Chicago is a community-based program that provides comprehensive educational and family support services to economically and educationally disadvantaged children. The program provides a half-day preschool, a half-day or all-day kindergarten, and an all-day service in the primary grades. Parental involvement is an underpinning of the program. Parent involvement can be in the form of acting as a classroom aide, accompanying field trips, using the parent-resource room, participating in reading groups with other parents, or taking trips to the library with teachers or children. CPC also sponsors continuing education courses for parents.^{19,20}
- The Lincoln Community Learning Centers (CLC) in Lincoln, Nebraska provide support and services to children, families, and neighborhoods through collaborative partnerships using local schools as the hub of service. These centers provide safe, supervised before and after school programs, weekend and summer enrichment programs, and many other supportive services for citizens of all ages. The CLC initiative is grounded in the belief that relationships and collaborations are the cornerstones that create positive change. CLC partners believe that life-long learning is a shared responsibility of the community's residents. The program is an innovative approach designed to link the community, neighborhoods, schools, and people of all ages, backgrounds and walks of life to improve student learning, and create strong families and healthy neighborhoods.²¹

Conclusion

Studies show that the majority of parents want to be involved in their children's education, but many face barriers that prevent them from doing so. And although educators identify parental

involvement as a best practice, schools often don't have the resources or the time to reach out to families who may be reluctant to participate. Afterschool can offer parents a comfortable, flexible setting in which to engage with their children and become involved in their education. Parents enjoy activities that offer a chance to socialize and discuss concerns with other parents and staff. Afterschool programs are also an important forum for identifying and providing resources and services that strengthen families. Creating a program that reflects the ideas and desires of the parents involved leads to program improvements, increased attendance, and greater parental investment.

¹ Cotton, K., and Wikeland, K. R. (1989). *Parent involvement in education*. Retrieved February 27, 2008, from the NWREL Web site: <http://www.nwrel.org/scpd/sirs/3/cu6.html>

² Henderson, A. T., et al. (1994). *A new generation of evidence: The family is critical to student*. Washington, D.C.: National Committee for Citizens in Education.

³ Decker, L. E., et al. (2000). *Engaging families & communities, pathways to educational success*. Boca Raton, FL: National Community Educational Association, Florida Atlantic University.

⁴ Henderson, A. T., & Mapp, K. L. (2002). *A new wave of evidence: The impact of school, family, and community connections on student achievement*. Austin, TX: National Center for Family & Community Connections With Schools.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Harris, E. & Wimer, C. (2004, April). *Engaging with families in out-of-school time learning, No. 4*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard Family Research Project.

⁷ Decker, L. E., et al. (2000). *Engaging families & communities, pathways to educational success*. Boca Raton, FL: National Community Educational Association, Florida Atlantic University.

⁸ Cotton, K., & Wikeland, K. R. (1989). *Parent involvement in education*. Retrieved February 27, 2008, from the NWREL Web site: <http://www.nwrel.org/scpd/sirs/3/cu6.html>

⁹ TASC. (2006). *Increasing family and parent engagement in after school*. New York, NY: Author. Retrieved February 27, 2008, from <http://www.tascorp.org/content/document/detail/1455/>

¹⁰ MetLife with Harris Interactive. (2007). *The MetLife survey of the american teacher 2007: The homework experience*. Retrieved March 1, 2008, from MetLife Web site: www.metlife.com/teachersurvey

¹¹ MetLife with Harris Interactive. (2005). *The MetLife survey of the american teacher 2004-2005 survey: Transitions in the role of supportive relationships*. Retrieved March 1, 2008, from MetLife Web site: www.metlife.com/teachersurvey

¹² Perkins, D. F., et al. (2004). *After-school programs parent involvement plan*. University Park, PA: Department of Agriculture and Extension Education, The Pennsylvania State University.

¹³ Harris, E. & Wimer, C. (2004, April). *Engaging with families in out-of-school time learning, No 4*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard Family Research Project.

¹⁴ Education Works. (n.d.). Beacon centers connecting families and schools. Retrieved February 29, 2008, from <http://www.educationworks-online.org/Programs-BeaconCenters.htm>

¹⁵ P/PV. (n.d.) Youth major projects index, Philadelphia Beacons. Retrieved March 3, 2008, from P/PV Web site: http://www.ppv.org/ppv/youth/youth_major_projects.asp?section_id=8&initiative_id=16

¹⁶ Kakli, Z., Kreider, H., Little, P., Buck, T., & Coffey, M. (2006). *Focus on families! How to build and support family-centered practices in after school*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard Family Research Project and Build the Out-of-School Time Network (BOSTnet).

¹⁷ (n.d.). Retrieved March 4, 2008, from Whitefoord Community Program Web site: <http://www.whitefoord.org>

¹⁸ Kakli, Z., Kreider, H., Little, P., Buck, T., & Coffey, M. (2006). *Focus on families! How to build and support family-centered practices in after school*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard Family Research Project and Build the Out-of-School Time Network (BOSTnet).

¹⁹ (n.d.) Child-parent center. Retrieved February 29, 2008, from Helping America's Youth Web site: <http://guide.helpingamericasyouth.gov/programdetail.cfm?id=52>

²⁰ (n.d.). Chicago child parent center and expansion program. Retrieved February 29, 2008, from <http://www.sharingsuccess.org/code/vp/profiles/7.html>

²¹ Lincoln Community Learning Centers. (2006). Retrieved March 4, 2008, from <http://www.lincolnclc.org/>