

Engaging Families at the Secondary Level: What Schools Can Do to Support Family Involvement

By Chris Ferguson and Víctor Rodríguez

Commonly, when parents attempt to talk to their teenagers about school, the response is short and uninformative. Adults, whether teachers or family members, have taken this resistance as a sign of rejection. However, research in this field shows that, in fact, teenagers do want to interact with their parents, as well as other adults, and have them involved in their lives (Duffett & Johnson, 2004).

Educators have also assumed that parents aren't as involved or as interested in the progress of their adolescent children. However, Shaver and Walls (1998) have found that parents do have a desire to be involved in lives of their adolescent children, regardless of their economic status or ethnicity. Parents just aren't always successful in their efforts, so they tend to be more cautious in their actions. The crux of family-school involvement at the middle and high school level is determining the kinds of adult interactions that not only allow teenagers to have autonomy and respect but also meet the needs of families and schools.

At the elementary level, families commonly assist with homework, eat lunch at school, volunteer as reading tutors, and are a welcomed visible presence. In contrast, successful involvement at the high school level might include special meetings to communicate test information or test preparation strategies; discussions on college planning; participation on a school improvement team; or workshops designed to teach homework strategies or methods to address adolescent issues. Involvement at the secondary level is often much less visible, though just as valuable. Research (Henderson & Mapp, 2002) demonstrates that family-based processes that successfully support teenage academic achievement include interactions where families

- **talk often with their teenagers about school;**
- **help them make plans for postsecondary education; and**
- **keep them focused on learning and homework during the school year.**

For school leaders like Mrs. Cortez in the School Snapshot, the issue is, how do schools support and encourage salient family engagement at the secondary level?

SCHOOL SNAPSHOT

Mrs. Cortez, the principal of a large urban high school, and her lead counselor, Mr. Thomas, have just returned from a meeting at the central office with the district's family involvement coordinator. At the urging of a special community task force created by the superintendent, the district's school board has just adopted a new policy regarding family involvement at the high school level. All the high schools in the district are to develop an approach that will involve families in supporting student learning and draw on the resources that families can provide to schools. It is to be fully implemented the following school year. It is now early spring.

When Mrs. Cortez and Mr. Thomas discuss this new mandate with the school's lead teacher cadre the next day, the teachers are not opposed to the idea, but they aren't sure where to begin. Mrs. Cortez asks if anyone has read an article or attended a conference presentation lately that addresses this subject.

SCHOOL SNAPSHOT *Continued*

Mr. Thomas says that he has just read an article about family involvement at the high school level. The article states that secondary schools have to think about parent involvement in a very different way. They need to help families provide support for student learning and make continued education a goal for all students. All of this is to be done while working with rebellious teenagers! One of the teachers asks if they think they can make staying in school as important as a new pair of name-brand tennis shoes. They all laugh, but they all agree with her statement.

One of the teachers tells a story about helping a student earlier in the week by answering her questions about how her parents should fill in a section of her college application. The group agrees that students need more help with college preparation.

Mr. Thomas states that he and the other counselors have been telling the students to get their college visits done early because narrowing their choices to a few colleges makes the process much simpler than completing a larger number of applications and then choosing one. However, this information has not been reaching the parents. After a few more minutes of discussion, the group agrees—the students and their families need more information on applying to college and for financial aid. One of the staff members asks, “Wouldn’t this be a good place to start a meaningful collaboration with families, students, and school staff?”

Within minutes, the group drafts a beginning outline of a plan. The group is working intensely and excitedly when Mrs. Cortez asks, “Do you think we ought to involve the families and the students if this project is supposed to be a collaborative one?” There is laughter. One of the teachers comments that there is nothing like giving a bunch of teachers a problem to solve: “We tend to just jump to the solution, don’t we?”

Mr. Thomas suggests they start again. This time they brainstorm a different topic: Who should be involved in planning a program to support families and students as they plan for the future? They decide they want a diverse list of students, family representatives, school staff, and community members who could serve on a task force to explore the possibilities. They narrow their

number to a list of 15 names and then divide the names among the teachers to spread out the work of calling everyone.

The next question is what to do at the first meeting. The group quickly reaches consensus on two issues. First, they need to get everyone at the meeting to value the importance of family involvement in future planning for secondary students. Second, they need to interest family members in participating in the effort.

Several of the staff members volunteer to work on an activity to illustrate the need for family involvement at this level. Their school now requires that all new programs be research-based. Before moving this process forward, they need to look for research in the area and identify other schools that might provide examples of this kind of program.

Another staff member offers one other issue for consideration in their planning. She states that when someone personally invites her to share or partner in a project, she always feels good about giving her time and energy. Other staff members agree. Soon, the group decides to adopt specific strategies in order to create a welcoming culture for parents:

- 1. Respect them as equal partners.**
- 2. Recognize their potential contributions.**
- 3. Welcome them to the school and this new effort.**

As they build their initial activity and begin their contact with families, they keep these three strategies in mind. Their plan may have started with the school staff, but they intend for it to become the school community’s plan.

Mrs. Cortez is impressed and pleased with the positive responses from her staff and their willingness to meet with parents as equal partners. However, she also knows that this is only the beginning. She, her staff, and the families of her students have a lot of work to do before they will be able to implement a successful family involvement program for the high school.

What to Consider

Engaging Families at the Secondary Level

Mrs. Cortez was handed an incredibly large project to be completed in a very short period of time. To do this, she began by introducing the concept to a select group of staff, encouraging them to talk about what needs might be addressed through such a program, and, most importantly, helping them to see the importance of involving family members and students early in the process. It would have been much easier for her to have let the lead teachers plan and implement the project as they were ready to do before she asked if they needed to involve the students' families in the process. If she had taken the quicker and easier approach, the efforts would have represented the needs and perspectives of only the school staff and lacked buy-in by all the stakeholders who have an interest in student success.

By including students' families in the planning and implementation stages, educators can broaden the scope of the work and increase the resources available to the school and its students. In these more inclusive involvement efforts, the school takes responsibility for providing a balanced program while also ensuring that parents become engaged in ways that are meaningful to them and as their home and work life permit (Ritenour, 2004). Gutman and Midgley (2000) also found that although family involvement as a single factor in improved student performance may have little significance, when it is combined with support from teachers, a sense of belonging by students, and meaningful family involvement, there can be significant impact on the educational experience of the child.

Just as Mrs. Cortez focused on a specific target for her school, other schools will benefit from narrowing their scope of work, particularly when starting a new initiative. For instance, if student homework completion and grades are low, the school could focus on how to help parents work with students at home on their assignments. When parents know how to help with homework, the result can be higher student performance on these assignments (Balli, Deom, & Wedman, 1998).

If the school decides to target what students do after they leave high school, they might work with family members to encourage their children to plan for and attend college. When there is a joint effort between school and home to promote continued education after high school graduation, students are more likely to make plans for and extend education past the high school level, regardless of family background (Fan & Chen, 2001).

A review of recent research (Henderson & Mapp, 2002) in the field advocates that middle and high schools should promote the following actions:

- **Providing workshops or holding meetings on**
 - *topics that families suggest, such as developing positive discipline strategies and supporting children through crisis;*
 - *program options, graduation requirements, test schedules, and education options after graduation and how to plan for them;*
 - *financing postsecondary education and applying for financial aid; and*
 - *courses students should take to be prepared for college or other education opportunities after graduation.*

What to Consider *continued*

- **Contacting families on a regular basis through**
 - *regular phone calls from teachers to discuss something positive their children are doing in class, not just when there are problems;*
 - *meetings with teachers to talk about their children's progress and what they're learning, particularly as it relates to future plans; and*
 - *phones calls, e-mails, or other methods to connect with parents during the summer about the next school year's expectations and activities and build a relationship with each family.*
- **Welcoming family involvement in the school through**
 - *family and student tours of the school or classroom visits and observations and*
 - *special visits at next grade-level feeder schools to meet with families about the new schools' programs and offer families and students an opportunity to ask questions.*



Putting It Into Practice

In each of the four syntheses created by SEDL's National Center for Family and Community Connections with Schools, the authors include recommendations for building effective programs based on the studies included. In the 2002 synthesis, *A New Wave of Evidence: The Impact of School, Family, and Community Connections on Student Achievement*, Henderson and Mapp recommend the following strategies to help school staff develop effective family and community connections with schools.

1 To Assist Families in Helping Students Plan for the Future

Counselors or teachers can

- *Hold monthly workshops for upper-grade-level students and their families. Each workshop topic could be devoted to a specific aspect of college planning.*
- *Plan a series of workshops for lower-grade-level students and their families during the spring when students are making their course selections for the next school year.*
- *Plan a series of events for freshmen and their families to explore future careers by working with local businesses. These events could involve job shadowing, job exploration, and course selection. Students have a limited understanding of what most jobs actually entail, so it is hard for them to make informed decisions about the future. These kinds of events help them gain a more "real" picture of the work they think they'd like to do.*
- *Coordinate with the middle school counselors to hold several planning events in the spring for 8th graders and their families. These events might focus on course selection and planning for the future.*

Teachers can

- *Create special assignments that require students to talk to family members, business owners, or others in the community about their futures. For example, students can create research reports for a history class about the difference in work requirements for a job that existed 30 years ago and a similar position today; in math, students can interview former students or older relatives or friends who are college graduates about the costs of college and create a budget for their own goals; or in English, students can create a special-edition newspaper featuring stories on former students who are now college graduates.*

Families can

- *Talk to their children on a regular basis to discover what is actually happening in school. Children often reply “Nothing” when their parents ask them “What did you do in school today?” But, if asked how a specific test, homework assignment, or special event went, the child will give a more informative answer.*
- *Work with their children to set goals each year. This will require that parents learn about graduation requirements and different graduation plans.*

2 To Assist Families in Supporting Academic Instruction**Counselors can**

- *Conduct workshops for families on the information on the school's report card and explain other information that will provide families with an overview of the testing expectations for students.*
- *Work with teachers to provide course content information sheets for families so students can make better course selection choices.*

Teachers can

- *Invite family members to observe teaching strategies so they can assist students at home.*
- *Organize math, science, or other content area nights or events and invite families to attend. Generally, these events use a learning center approach, involving family members and students in collaborative problem solving or content exploration. This is a great opportunity to engage families in interactive processes and teach them what is being taught to the students.*
- *Call families and ask them if they need help with assisting their children with homework. These calls can be used to help determine workshops that could be offered to family members to assist them in supporting student learning.*
- *Post class assignments, timelines, and test dates electronically so families can keep track of when students should be studying or might need assistance.*

Families can

- *Monitor student progress daily to determine when students need assistance or when the family member needs to get help in order to provide the needed assistance to the student.*
- *Create a phone tree to help all parents stay informed on school events or activities.*
- *Participate on improvement teams that the school creates.*

For More Ideas on This Strategy

The Coalition of Essential Schools provides resources via its Web site to assist educators and families in working with adolescents. Its journal, *Horace*, contains practical insights and hints on working with adolescents. This journal is available in paper; however, electronic copies can be obtained at <http://www.essentialschools.org>. Jill Davidson's article, "Show, Don't Tell: Strategies for Family Involvement in CES Schools," (http://www.essentialschools.org/cs/resources/view/ces_res/305), provides key strategies and practical examples for this work.

CES National

1814 Franklin St., Suite 700

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<http://www.essentialschools.org>

For More Ideas on This Strategy *Continued*

Middle Ground, a publication of the **National Middle School Association**, contains anecdotes and suggested strategies for successful programs for middle schools. Though all of its issues relate to teaching at the middle school level, its August 2004 issue is dedicated to articles concerning family and community connections with schools.

National Middle School Association

4151 Executive Pkwy., Suite 300
Westerville, OH 43081
800-528-NMSA (6672)
614-895-4730
<http://www.nmsa.org>

The **Parent Institute** Web site houses two newsletters that provide insightful information that teachers can share with families or families can review themselves. One newsletter is written for middle school audiences; another for high school audiences. These documents are available in Spanish and English and may be downloaded at no cost from the Institute Web site.

The Parent Institute

P.O. Box 7474
Fairfax Station, VA 22039-7474
800-756-5525
703-323-9170
<http://www.parent-institute.com/hcl/>

Related Research

There are numerous studies that explore successful family involvement at the secondary level. The studies reported here represent several research designs: comparison studies, random surveys, and other descriptive methods. While each study provides comparative data or is rich in description about issues and factors influencing family involvement at the secondary level, they do not provide empirical evidence on what intervention strategies can positively impact student performance and can be found in randomized control trials. Additionally, the studies described in this section not only present current research, they also help to define what is known about effective family and community connections with schools.

As stated in the introduction to this brief, educators and families have assumed that secondary students do not want their families involved in their schools and that families don't see a need to be involved at the secondary level. This study provides a clear picture of what students and their families want and need. In 2004, the Wallace Foundation commissioned a report by Public Agenda to

explore the “voices” of the “consumers” of “out-of-school time”—parents and students (p. 7). Using random-digit-dialing technology, Duffett and Johnson conducted telephone interview surveys with 609 students in grades 6–12 and 1,003 parents or guardians of K–12 students from across the nation and collected questionnaires from 10 focus groups. Though the report covers a wide range of

topics, two findings tie directly to ideas associated with this brief:

- 1) Most youngsters believe organized activities are good, and they acknowledge that they sometimes need a push to become involved (p. 10).
- 2) Activities and programs that focus on learning appeal to students and parents regardless of their low-income and minority status (p. 13).

Duffett, A. & Johnson, J. (2004). *All work and no play? Listening to what kids and parents really want from out-of-school time.* New York: The Wallace Foundation. <http://www.wallacefoundation.org/WF/>

In two studies published by the Center for Research on the Education of Students Placed At Risk (CRESPAR), researchers explored family involvement at the secondary level. Both studies used follow-up data from the National Education Longitudinal Study of 1988 (NELS:88) for the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), which was collected in 1992. In the follow-up study, researchers interviewed 13,580 parents of students in their last year of high school who had also participated in the original NELS:88 research project, which collected surveys from approximately 24,000 parents. Catsambis and Garland (1997) found that as students move from middle school and toward graduation, parents are not less involved in their children's school life, but instead shift their role from less attention to day-to-day student behavior to more concern about educational expectations for their children. In the second study report, Catsambis (1998) narrowed her focus to explore whether this evolved parental involvement had an academic impact as students progressed from 8th grade to 12th grade. She found a high correlation between high levels of communication on academic matters and course selection and the number of course credits a student earned as well as enrollment in higher-level courses. In a third study using the same NELS:88 and follow-up data from 1992, Catsambis (2001) reported that 8th

graders benefited from family assistance with or supervision of home study; however, 10th graders did not gain as much from these types of interventions. This illustrates the necessity for families and school staff to use varied strategies for family involvement that are aligned to the needs and ages of children.

Catsambis, S., & Garland, J. E. (1997). *Parental involvement in students' education during middle school and high school.* (CRESPAR Report 18). Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University. ED423328. <http://www.csos.jhu.edu/crespar/reports.htm>

Catsambis, S. (1998). *Expanding knowledge of parental involvement in secondary education: Effects on high school academic success* (CRESPAR Report 27). Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University. ED426174. <http://www.csos.jhu.edu/crespar/reports.htm>

Catsambis, S. (2001). Expanding knowledge of parental involvement in children's secondary education: Connections with high school seniors' academic success. *Social Psychology of Education, 5*, 149–177.

Van Voorhis (2003) studied 6 sixth- and eighth-grade classes that received homework intervention strategies through Teachers Involving Parents in Schoolwork (TIPS) and 4 classes that did not. Based on her comparison, she found that when schools use a formalized homework help model, there is an increase in supportive family involvement at home. She states that if schools desire an increase in effective parental involvement, they need to develop a formal structure that assists parents in developing strategies to support student learning.

Van Voorhis, F. L. (2003). Interactive homework in middle school: Effects on family involvement and science achievement. *The Journal of Educational Research, 96*(6), 323–338.

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References Cited, pages 1–4

Within this document, the descriptions of concepts and recommendations come from both long-standing foundational research as well as more current studies. The references included in this section reflect both types of literature.

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Find Research Related to This Strategy

You can find more information and research on this topic by searching the National Center for Family and Community Connections with Schools' publications database, *The Connection Collection: School–Family–Community Publications Database*, at <http://www.se dl.org/connections/resources/bibsearch.html>. If you are looking for information about organizing school, family, and community involvement, useful keywords to help narrow your search are middle school, high school, and secondary.



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