Core Function: Family Engagement in a School Community

Effective Practice — Educate parents to support their children's learning and teachers to work with parents

Overview: Schools can improve student learning by ensuring that teachers are equipped with necessary skills to work with parents and by providing parents with tools to support their children's learning. Schools can provide guidance and support to parents by encouraging family reading activities, ways to support their children's studying, and interactive homework activities. Schools can also encourage and collaborate with parents in their efforts to sustain positive verbal interactions with their children and to model responsibility and respect. Successful initiatives are those that elicit parent input and provide two-way child-centered, regular, clear, and constructive communication. Teachers often lack training in working with families to support student learning; professional development that is hands-on with opportunity for reflection is essential for teachers and other school personnel to enhance school–family partnerships.

Evaluate Your Practice: How can schools provide guidance and support to help parents foster and support their children's learning? How can professional development help teachers collaborate with parents to foster and support their children's learning?

Introduction

The "curriculum of the home"—the bundle of attitudes, habits, knowledge, and skills that children acquire through their relationship with their family and that facilitates their school learning—is more predictive of academic learning than the family's socioeconomic status (Marzano, Pickering, & Pollock, 2001; Redding, 2000, 2006). Walberg (2007) notes "cooperative efforts by parents and educators to modify alterable academically stimulating conditions in the home have had beneficial effects on learning for both older and younger students" (p. 96). When teachers reach out to parents by meeting face to face with them at the beginning of the year, send weekly materials on how to help their children at home, and telephone routinely with news about their children, math and reading performance can improve substantially (Westat & Policy Studies Associates, 2002, as cited in Henderson, Mapp, Johnson, & Davies, 2007; Kraft & Dougherty, 2013). Teachers can help their students' family members to be aware of what they can do outside of school to encourage their student's academic success at each age and grade level (Caspe, Lopez, & Wolos, 2006/2007; Kreider, Caspe, Kennedy, & Weiss, 2007; Walberg, 2007).

Schools can provide guidance to families to support their children's learning in a variety of ways; however, educators and other school staff must have professional development addressing the most effective ways to work with families to promote learning. Effective research-based practices in these areas are described below.

How can schools provide guidance and support to help parents foster and support their children's learning?

Guidance to help parents support their children's learning at home. Walberg (2011) argues that "even small improvements in the amount and quality of academically constructive hours outside school are likely to have more than moderate learning effects while contributing little or nothing to schools' costs" (p. 70). Parents can encourage their children's academic success through home activities that link to their children's curriculum in school. For example, programs that equip parents with new abilities to nurture their children's language skills have resulted in positive and enduring reading outcomes (St. Clair, Jackson, & Zweiback, 2012). Redding (2000) has concluded that school/teacher efforts to encourage family reading activities result in both improved reading skills and interest in reading. Reading School–Home Links, available in archived form through the U.S. Department of Education, provide an example of

student assignments that require parent–child interaction, link to school learning, and simultaneously educate parents about school learning (ADI, 2011; Jeynes, 2013; Redding, 2006). Schools should also encourage parents to both establish a quiet and distraction-free studying/reading place for their children and enforce a consistent studying routine and schedule based on their child's age and academic requirements (ADI, 2011; Redding, 2000, 2006). Interactive homework (homework assignments that require help from family members), especially when coupled with teacher outreach and invitations for two-way communication, can be especially effective in bridging home and school with powerful, positive outcomes for students. For example, the TIPS (Teachers Involve Parents in Schoolwork) program increased students' grades and homework completion, as well as parent involvement (Van Voorhis, 2003, 2011a, 2011b; Bennett-Conroy, 2012).

Guidance to help parents model/encourage responsibility and respect and sustain positive verbal interactions with their children. Several meta-analyses have shown that the most highly correlated components of parent involvement are also subtle—high expectations, loving and effective communication, and a parental style that is both supportive and provides structure (Jeynes, 2011a, 2011b). Research has also shown that low-income families tend to speak with, encourage, and read to their children less frequently than wealthier families (Hart & Risley, 1995; Walberg, 2011). Teachers should recognize that parents of all ethnicities and socioeconomic levels do value education (Henderson & Mapp, 2002), but many face barriers, such as language differences, a lack of familiarity or prior negative experiences with the U.S. educational system, a desire to not interfere with how teachers do their jobs, and outside stressors (Vera et al., 2012). A unifying thread in many success stories is "the philosophy of working in collaboration with parents as opposed to a more paternalistic approach where parents are told what to do" (Vera et al., 2012, p. 198). Teacher training can bring awareness of the deficit view many hold toward parents of poverty, language difference, or low education by showing how to recognize and build on families' strengths and funds of knowledge (Chen, Kyle, & McIntyre, 2008; Moll & Gonzalez, 2004). Learning about families' funds of knowledge can provide culturally relevant prompts to encourage verbal interaction between parents and students. Interactive homework

(described above) can also support positive parent–child interactions and increase student engagement.

Family members will benefit from receiving practical, jargon-free guidance on ways to maintain supportive verbal interaction with their children and promote healthy development at home (CII, 2011); this support has been shown to have a significant, positive and sustained effect on youth development (Durlak et al., 2007). Guidance should be carefully worded; offering a workshop or tip sheet on "parenting" may insult families (Henderson et al., 2007). Instead, schools should offer suggestions for maximizing learning outside of the school day, but also seek parent input on topics of interest and offer resources accordingly. O'Donnell, Kirkner, and Meyer-Adams (2008) found that involvement of low-income parents may be highly dependent upon personal outreach efforts and relationship building; therefore parents promoting parenting classes and then leading other parents in multi-session groups may appeal to them.

Developing social/emotional skills such as taking responsibility for one's actions and showing respect for others cannot be accomplished in isolation, either at home or at school. These skills must be modeled, practiced, and reinforced across multiple contexts (Mart, Dusenbury, & Weissburg, 2011). Teachers and other educators should regularly share information and create opportunities for families to communicate their insights, concerns, and hopes for their children; such attention to affective as well as academic concerns can build trust between the school and home. Communication should be child-centered, constructive, clear, and concrete (avoid educational lingo and acronyms), and continuous (Mart et al., 2011). Schools implementing character education programs that emphasize respect and responsibility should include families in their efforts in order to increase their chances for success. Parents should be represented on character education committees, and special efforts should be made to reach out to parents who may not feel they are a part of the school community (Lickona, Schaps, & Lewis, 2007).

How can professional development help teachers collaborate with parents to foster and support their children's learning?

While most teachers agree that family involvement in important for student learning, most report receiving

little or no preparation for working with parents and enter the profession unaware of how to develop excellent school–family partnerships (Bartels & Eskow, 2010; Patte, 2011). Teachers and school leaders need both preservice training and ongoing professional development, including practice in engaging with a variety of family contexts, to develop the necessary skills to foster effective school–home partnerships. Teachers may incorrectly assume parents know how to help their children, and they may express surprise that parents find school personnel threatening; therefore it is critical to understand what teachers believe in order to design effective professional development (Shumow & Harris, 2000). Teacher training is even more essential when the teacher and the students' families have different home cultures, with some teachers holding a deficit view of low-income families and others simply unaware of ways that these families and communities can contribute to children's education (Shumow & Harris, 2000). As Ferguson (2008) states, "When school staff have a better understanding of their students' home cultures, families' parenting practices, home contexts, home crises, or significant family and community events, they can develop processes and strategies to bridge school-based and home-based activities and increase support for student learning" (p. 14).

Positive communication sets the stage for developing a relationship built on trust and respect, including beneficial home–school relationships (Bartels & Eskow, 2010; Bryk & Schneider, 2003). Two-way communication, which involves the importance of listening as well as informing, has been successfully targeted within professional development programs that involved training teachers to use active listening and other communication skills used by counselors (e.g., Symeou, Roussounidou, & Michaelides, 2012). Professional development is enhanced by opportunities for teacher practice and reflection; giving teachers time to consider ways they can connect their teaching to what they learn from their students' families can maximize the benefits of the training (Kyle, McIntyre, Miller, & Moore, 2005). Hands-on, interactive professional development should be followed by brief refresher trainings throughout the school year and focus group discussions on implementation (Cavey, 1998). In addition, it is imperative that administrators and school boards also participate in preservice and ongoing professional development on the importance of and strategies for cultivating positive home–school relationships (Dotger & Bennett, 2010; Hiatt-Michael, 2006, 2010; Sheldon

& Sanders, 2009).

Indicators to Support the Effective Practice
The school provides parents with practical guidance to maintain regular and supportive verbal interactions with their children.
All-school events (e.g., Family–School nights) include parent-child interactive activities.
Teachers regularly make "interactive" assignments that encourage parent-child interaction relative to school learning.
The school provides a Family Resource Library that includes materials with information about parenting and parents' roles in children's education.
The school encourages parents to volunteer and provides orientation and training for them.
The school provides intergenerational associations in which parents or community volunteers assist in the classroom.
Parent education programs include some multi-session group experiences with specific agendas.
Parent education programs are led by trained parent leaders.
The school offers parent education programs focused on building skills relative to the curriculum of the home (what parents can do at home to support their children's learning).
The school provides parents with practical guidance to establish a quiet place for children's studying at home and consistent discipline for studying at home.
The school provides parents with practical guidance to encourage their children's regular reading habits at home.
The school provides parents with practical guidance to model and encourage respectful and responsible behaviors.
The school provides parents with practical guidance on learning standards.
Professional development programs for teachers include assistance in working effectively with parents.

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