4 Connecting Schools with Families and Communities

The Challenge

Schools, families, communities, and children themselves all play important roles in promoting student learning. Children are more likely to do their best when all these players work together to ensure that challenges students face outside the classroom are addressed, rather than remaining as ongoing barriers to student learning and achievement.

Establishing a strong foundation for learning begins before birth and starts with families. Children with adequate health care, housing, parental support and nutrition are better prepared to learn. However, all too often, low-income children and children of color start pre-school and kindergarten behind their more advantaged peers and face continual challenges in their homes and communities. These challenges, unfortunately, can push children further behind. Providing families with various supports to ensure the health, safety and steady emotional development of their children and engaging parents as their children's first teachers is essential for a positive beginning.

One such support, and an important factor in school readiness, is early screening for disabilities or developmental challenges. This should ideally occur before children reach pre-school age. Approximately 16% of all children have disabilities that affect their schooling, including speech-language impairments, mental retardation, learning disabilities and emotional or behavioral disturbances. Yet only about half of these disabilities are identified before a child enters school.[147] The cost of not identifying these disabilities early on is high, as problems tend to compound and become more difficult to treat if not addressed right away.

Home visitation programs, especially those for young, low-income or first-time parents, can help to identify disabilities or developmental challenges, as well as physical and emotional challenges. Because low-income children and children of color are much more likely to experience health problems, it is important to diagnose and treat them as early as possible. For example, iron deficiency anemia, affecting nearly 25% of poor children in the United States, is associated with impaired cognitive development.[148] African-American children are more likely than white children to suffer from asthma, which is troubling not only for the physical consequences of the disease, but also because it has been associated with poor school readiness as well.[149]

America's commitment to social justice is most tested at the point where aid to vulnerable young parents, attention to the needs of

Establishing a strong foundation for learning begins before birth and starts with families.

---

[147] Frances Page Glascoe and Henry Shapiro, "Developmental and Behavioral Screening," *Developmental and Behavioral News* (Elk Grove Village, IL: American Academy of Pediatrics, 1999). Available at: http://www.dbpeds.org/media/2004AutumnSODBPNews.pdf

[148] Center on Hunger and Poverty, *Statement on the Link Between Nutrition and Cognitive Development in Children* (Waltham, MA: Center on Hunger and Poverty, 1998). Available at: http://www.centeronhunger.org/cognitive.html

[149] Janet Currie, "Health Disparities and Gaps in School Readiness," *The Future of Children* vol. 15, no. 1, Spring 2005. Available at: http://www.futureofchildren.org/information2826/information_show.htm?doc_id=255988

infants and toddlers, and the marshalling of community support for these efforts come together. Providing health and other social services to families can be a powerfully stabilizing force. Yet many parents are unaware of the available services, such as nutrition classes, housing assistance, counseling, and adult education. The community school model, a promising approach that connects families and students to social services, offer such supports to families in a setting that is familiar and safe – their child's school.

Parental participation is a key support in the academic achievement of children, both young and old. Many studies have found that when parents, regardless of their income or background, are involved in their children's school lives, their children do better.[150] While many parents need little encouragement to become fully involved, some find it much more difficult to participate.

Poor and minority parents in particular are less likely to be engaged in their children's school lives for a variety of reasons. Language, for example, is often a major barrier even for the most enthusiastic parents. Information related to student performance and school meetings or events is too often provided only in English, making the school's primary outreach efforts of little use to limited-English-proficient parents. Immigration status can also deter parents from becoming involved. Because they may fear deportation (or other legal repercussions) they may not become actively involved in their children's education

outside of the home. A lack of understanding of the United States education system, cultural barriers, or memories of negative experiences with their own education render many parents uncomfortable with or even distrustful of educators. Many immigrant and minority parents feel that educators do not respect them or their children, while some educators do not see parents of color as collaborators in their children's education.[151]

Economic barriers also impact the level of parental involvement in education. Some parents do not have any flexibility in their work schedule, or work multiple jobs, making it nearly impossible for them to attend school meetings and events. For low-income parents and those paid on an hourly basis, taking off work to participate in school activities is particularly costly. They are faced with a choice of reduced income or greater school involvement. Others suffer from inconvenient access, or a lack of access, to transportation. The compounded effects of language, immigration status, culture and economics reduce parents' ability to be involved actively in the education of their children.

Whatever the reason, whenever parents remove themselves or are not welcomed into their children's school lives, the children pay the price. Although in many instances parents do not know how to nurture actively their children's academic growth and too few teachers and school administrators know how to engage parents around such issues, it is critical that they learn to do so.

---

[150] Anne T. Henderson, and Karen L. Mapp, *A New Wave of Evidence: The Impact of School, Family and Community Connections on Student Achievement, Annual Synthesis 2002* (Austin, TX: National Center for Family and Community Connections with Schools, Southwest Educational Development Laboratory, 2002). Available at: http://www.sedl.org/connections/resources/evidence.pdf

[151] Peter McDermott and Julia Rothenberg, "Why Urban Parents Resist Involvement in their Children's Elementary Education," *The Qualitative Report* vol.5, no. 3 &4, October 2000. Available at: http://www.nova.edu/ssss/QR/QR5-3/mcdermott.html

A student's academic success is tied to his or her healthy physical, social, and emotional development, and opportunities for success are increased when parents and communities take an active role in children's education.

The Recommendation

There should be increased state and federal support for the establishment of community schools that connect students and families to social services. States should guarantee that every child receives early screening for developmental and physical challenges and develop solutions to address any challenges identified. Children and families who face higher risks should receive professional home visits to provide additional assistance and, as needed, effective interventions. Teachers must receive greater training on how to better engage parents as partners in the learning process.

Community Schools

Community schools reshape the structure of traditional schools and recast their roles in the community by explicitly positioning schools, families and communities as vital partners in fostering the health, well-being and academic growth of children. These schools help address the out-of-school needs of students and their families so that young people can focus on learning, rather than difficulties at home, when they are in the classroom and also take advantage of nurturing opportunities outside of the classroom. Community schools are typically open before and after regular school hours and on the weekends. For students, these hours are used for quality after-school programs that foster not only academic achievement, but also students' social, cultural, and emotional growth. But community schools also bring parents and families into schools and build relationships with supportive community organizations and institutions. Typically taking place in a school's family resource center, an array of activities including literacy development, adult education, job training, child care, health care, counseling and other support services are available to families.

Many community schools serve as a connector between families and social services that help address problems, such as domestic violence and substance abuse. Left unaddressed, these issues outside of the classroom often distract students from learning and make it more difficult for parents to participate actively in their children's education. By acknowledging that children's home lives are inextricably linked to their performance in school and by addressing out-of-school needs, community schools help create the foundation for a good education.

Providing supplemental support services to students and their families has been shown to lead to real improvements in their well-being. Researchers have documented that students in community schools demonstrate positive outcomes, including higher test scores, fewer disciplinary problems, improved attendance

and graduation rates, and diminished incidence of self-destructive behaviors.[152]

Early Screening and Home Visiting

Identified early and treated appropriately, developmental and physical disabilities and conditions need not impair a child's readiness to learn. There have been important advances in screening methods, which require little time on the part of healthcare practitioners and others who work with children. Early screening should be incorporated into routine physical examinations and, as often as possible, be made available in child development settings, including Head Start and Early Head Start, and offered in community schools. Doing so will help to make these critical services available to more families.

Early identification of conditions such as autism or vision impairment provides more time and a greater chance for children to receive services to treat their condition. In addition, children who participate in such programs are more likely to have positive life outcomes, such as graduating from high school, gaining employment, and avoiding teen pregnancy and delinquency. It is estimated that these early intervention programs save society a significant sum of money – $30,000 - $100,000 per child.[153]

Home visiting is another strategy that has demonstrated effectiveness over time in ameliorating the effects of poverty and improving the well-being of low-income children. Home visits by parent educators, professional healthcare practitioners and other trained professionals provide critical support to vulnerable families to foster strong and healthy relationships. Support often includes identification of social services available to families; education on issues such as breastfeeding and nutrition, postpartum depression, child safety and the developmental stages of children; and confidence building.

Two home visiting programs that have proven successful are Parents as Teachers, which is used nationwide, and the Nurse Home-Family Partnership program, which supports low-income first-time mothers and has been implemented in multiple counties and across several states. The benefits of such programs are extensive and have included improved parenting skills, increased parental involvement in reading and other educational activities with children, increased immunizations and pre-natal care, reduced smoking and use of other substances, reduced reliance on public assistance, decreased likelihood of child abuse and neglect, improved school attendance, and higher achievement scores.[154]

---

[152] Martin J.Blank, Atelia Melaville and Bela P. Shah, *Making the Difference: Research and Practice in Community Schools* (Washington, DC: Coalition for Community Schools, 2003). Available at: http://www.communityschools.org/mtdhomepage.html

[153] Frances Page Glascoe and Henry Shapiro, "Developmental and Behavioral Screening," *Developmental and Behavioral News* (Elk Grove Village, IL: American Academy of Pediatrics, 1999). Available at: http://www.dbpeds.org/media/2004AutumnSODBPNews.pdf

[154] Healthy Families America, *Home Visiting – A Proven Strategy for Helping Families Thrive and Ensuring School Success* (Chicago, IL: Healthy Families America). Available at: http://www.healthyfamiliesamerica.org/downloads/hvforum_one_pager.pdf

Parental Involvement

Effective schools include parents as their teaching partners and systematically make them part of the learning process. When parents set and communicate expectations of success in school and of continuing on to post-secondary institutions, when they assist with homework, when they forge positive relationships with their children's teachers, and when they monitor their children's progress and recognize accomplishments, students are more likely to reach higher levels of achievement, develop positive social skills and avoid risky behavior.[155] Educators at every level – from the classroom to the superintendent's office – need to establish positive, productive and respectful relationships with parents, families and the other community organizations and institutions that can support students. Educators need to reach out to families and provide guidance on how parents can best support and encourage their children. In order to do so, training on techniques for communicating and engaging parents should be a part of teacher training and professional development programs.

Community Schools: Working Together to Address the Needs of All Children
LESSONS FROM OREGON FORUM

Oregon's Schools Uniting Neighborhoods (SUN) initiative focuses on ensuring success for children and closing the achievement gap. The initiative strives to meet the needs of the whole child by bringing together parents, schools, businesses, government and non-profit community organizations to offer services to students and their families. In-school support teams, after-school programming, inclusion of cultural competency, and connection to various social services are the key components of the SUN initiative.

Earl Boyles Elementary and Woodmere Elementary, both located in Portland, Oregon, are SUN schools. At Earl Boyles, students are offered an array of after-school programs and enrichment activities. Services, including counseling, health care and other social services are available to their families. This previously unused school was renovated and reopened in 2002 as a community school and has met its initial learning goals. Woodmere Elementary offers students homework assistance, enrichment activities and mentoring through extended day classes that involve parents. Parents are able to take advantage of English language classes and parenting skills classes with follow-up in-home support services to help improve family relationship dynamics. Although three-quarters of the student population comes from low-income families, test scores have risen substantially over the last few years.

Information here is from:
The Renewing Our Schools, Securing Our Future forum in Portland, OR, August 27, 2004. Available at: http://www.americanprogress.org/atf/cf/{E9245FE4-9A2B-43C7-A521-5D6FF2E06E03}/oregonschoolreport.pdf
GreatSchools.net. Available at: www.greatschools.net

---

[155] Anne T. Henderson, and Karen L. Mapp, *A New Wave of Evidence: The Impact of School, Family and Community Connections on Student Achievement, Annual Synthesis 2002* (Austin, TX: National Center for Family and Community Connections with Schools, Southwest Educational Development Laboratory, 2002). Available at: http://www.sedl.org/connections/resources/evidence.pdf